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The Hand of Fate

**MEMOIRS OF GEORGE
GERZON**

as told by him to his daughter,

Helen (Gerzon) Goransson

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The creation of these memoirs began in April 1991. Over the years, George Gerzon dictated his story and essays to his daughter Helen, who transcribed the contents of his tapes.

These memoirs were finally published in June 1999 and presented on Father's Day.

To George Gerzon,

*My father, my hero, and forever a fighter for
justice and truth.*

With my admiration and love,

Helen

© June 1999

Reprinted November 1999

Notes from

Helen (Gerzon) Goransson

So many stories have been written about the Holocaust. The images of millions of Jews passively boarding trains that transported them to slave and death camps are those that most Americans picture of that dark time in history.

Growing up in my household, my father and mother told me other stories along with the tragic ones. They were stories of heroic people who suffered during the war years, but survived thanks to their youthful exuberance, their desire to live, and their good fortune that kept them out of harm's way. They were strong of body and will, and clever, like 16-year-old Gerzon Trzcina (now George Gerzon), my father, who, at the first bombings of Poland in early September of 1939, suddenly found himself in Warsaw, separated from his family about 100 kilometers away, in a city soon to fall under siege. All my life my father recounted to me how he and others survived. We both felt that his was an interesting story worth sharing with the world. We finally got around to doing it, and this book is the fruit of our labor.

His memoirs chronicle pre-War II Poland and his years of life following the outbreak of the war. It tells the stories of other brave people he met along the way. It is the tale of a boy suddenly thrust into a world turned upside-down, and his feisty fast-track education to survival. It also acknowledges that it was the hand of fate (perhaps God directing the whole production?) that pushed this young man to live on to tell the stories. From his first encounters with anti-semitism in pre-War Poland, to his escape from the war-torn country, to his grueling experiences in the frozen northern regions of Russia, and, eventually to his struggles to establish a life in America, this is

a story of one man's courageous lifetime that leaves the reader with a lesson or two about overcoming adversity with inner strength, kindness and integrity.

My father is a great believer in destiny and justice, and his destiny is certainly to bear witness to the world of the realities of World War II, to help ensure that such atrocities will never again be allowed to occur. The remnants of European Jewry went on to build new lives all over the world, scattered like the feathery seeds of a dandelion which take hearty root. They, like my father, went from weakness to strength, and from darkness to light - a light which no one could extinguish. After 60 years, at the age of 76, my father is still trying to bring to justice the perpetrators of the inhumanity to man that he witnessed in his lifetime. In his words, "Justice delayed is justice denied."

As the offspring of my father, I believe that part of my destiny is to help my father write his story for others to read and learn and remember, so that justice will prevail and history will not repeat itself.

Notes from Others

“With his home town the site of the first documented massacre of Polish Jews by Germans, and following his own brushes with death in the streets of Warsaw, 16-year-old George Gerzon escaped the horrors of the Holocaust nearly 60 years ago, when he fled Poland. After the Nazi’s invaded, he eventually made his way to Russia. Like most Holocaust survivors, Gerzon has never forgotten the destruction of his home town, or the family and friends slaughtered by the Germans. He has not forgotten his tale of survival in the frozen forests of Russia and his journey back to freedom. For much of his adult life he has yearned to write a book about his experiences. But his desire to do so has remained an unfulfilled dream - until now. His daughter, Helen Goransson, has transcribed dozens of taped recordings of her father’s experiences and compiled them into “~~The~~ Hand of Fate,” a book which is not only a tribute to the ~~bravery~~ of a number of courageous Jews, but a fascinating tale of one man’s survival before, during and after the Holocaust.”

David Tibbets, August 19, 1999
Features Writer, The Canton Citizen

“It is clear that you have done a great deal of work to honor your father’s memory and to enable him to have borne witness to his experiences in Poland and Russia during the Holocaust. We often say that Holocaust memoirs are literary survivors. You have enabled your father’s story to be preserved. Those works which are most likely to find their way to the light of print reflect considerable thought and convey wisdom from the survival experience which can be of interest and perhaps inspiration to general readers.”

Alan Adelson, Executive Director
The Jewish Heritage Project

Foreward:

Introduction to My Story

As I write this, it is almost Passover when we Jews celebrate the freedom of our Jewish ancestors from slavery in Egypt. I often compare the Passover story with the release of the Jews from Nazi slavery in our generation, and especially on Passover I personally celebrate my release from our wartime slavery during World War II to the freedom of America.

As I prepare for another Passover celebration, it seems appropriate for me to free my ideas from the confines of my mind and heart and open them up to the readers of this document.

My own observations of the world and my personal philosophies stem from my own Jewish upbringing in Poland, certain Bible stories and religious teachings I acquired which made the greatest impact on me, and my personal struggles during the Second World War from 1939 to 1945. What history and teachings have shown me is that greed and jealousy show their faces throughout the history of mankind and manifest themselves in hatred, family struggles, war and destruction. And although organized religion was established to improve our civilization and bring order to a disorganized world, throughout history religion has been used as a justification for inhuman acts.

As I meditate on my life through these memoirs, time and time again I realize I was chosen to survive. I believe that each person is put on this earth with a mission. Perhaps my mission is to tell this story as proof that some source of power is

constantly controlling and planning our every move, each and every one of us, good and bad, with a purpose we may never fully understand.

George Gerzon - 1991

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George Gerzon (born Gerzon Trzcina)

Chapter 1

The Family Tree

The Trzcina Branch

In 1939 there were 3.5 million Jews in Poland, the result of hundreds of years of Jewish migration to Poland following the Spanish Inquisition. From Spain to France to Germany, the tide of persecution washed them over to Poland.

My ancestors probably arrived with this flow of people. My only recollections of my family history are limited, based on the few stories told to me by my father, a watered-down family folklore based on the few family stories told to him by his father.

My paternal grandfather came from Mlawa, Poland, a medium-sized city not far north of Warsaw, the capitol of Poland. His name was Boruch Gerzon Trzcina. I was named after him, Gerzon Trzcina, but I never knew him. Jewish custom does not condone children being named after living relatives. He died years before I was born. My father told me many stories about him, though.

By trade, Boruch was a renowned scribewho crafted religious scrolls on parchment, including Torahs, the parchment scrolls of the five books of Moses which are read in Jewish temples. These are often called the Sacred Scrolls. During the 1800's my grandfather was famous for his delicate and precise scroll work.

My father, Benim Trzcina, was born in 1874 in Mlawa. He grew up there and received a standard education for

a Jewish boy, including Hebrew and Russian studies, since, at that time, Russians occupied Poland and Poland as a country did not exist. Upon reaching adulthood he was drafted into the Russian army where he served at the turn of the century.

In 1905 he was involved in the Sino-Russian War in the Manchurian Peninsula. He also participated as a soldier of the Czar prior to the Russian Revolution. He served in the Russian army for a total of ten years, attaining the rank of corporal, and he also performed as a musician in the Czar's orchestra. He once played in Petersburg, now called Leningrad, in a special performance of the orchestra for the Czar himself. He mastered three instruments - the violin, bass fiddle and flute. He played beautifully. As a child I heard his music when he would play at home sometimes. I often played with these instruments, but my mind was less interested in the music than the technology of the instruments, and I recall taking them apart in the closet of our parlor just to see how they worked. Once I disassembled a watch which was given to him for his service to the Czar and I couldn't put it back together. I was punished, of course, for my audacity, but I was consumed with curiosity about the workings of things.

In 1914 Benim was again drafted into the Russian army to participate in World War I. After the Russian Revolution in 1917 he was finally released from service, and on foot and by hitch-hiking he returned home to Poland. At this time he was already married to my mother, Dina, and returning home to her.

She was eleven years younger than he, and before he departed to war she had already bore him a son, my brother Jacob. All during World War I she remained in Poland in the small town of Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, just north of War-

saw near the Orzyc River. During this period she endured many hardships with a young child to care for and a husband away at war for four years. Fortunately her family lived in the same town and she survived the war unscathed.

She told me many stories of hardships the family suffered while possession of Poland changed from one government to another due to the political struggles of war. The country's control went from Russian to German during World War I, then German to Russian with the end of the war, and then, during the Russian Revolution, the Russian army marched in and the Revolutionaries took over that town and swept into Prussia, with three different governments changing hands between 1917 and 1920. Bolsheviks were followed by Trotskies, followed by Mancheviks, followed by Bolsheviks, followed by Kereskies. Finally, peace was made and along with it the establishment in 1920 of an independent, separate, so-called democratic country of Poland. England and the United States helped formulate this agreement.

During the early 1920's, after my father returned from military service and, with his newly acquired skills in leather work for shoe-making thanks to his military experiences, my father supported his family. Having lived on her own for so long during my father's absence, my mother became a very shrewd businesswoman who possessed keen entrepreneurial skills, and she successfully managed several business ventures. After my father's return from Russia in 1918, a second child was born - Faiga, my sister. In 1920, another daughter, Pearl, was born. Late in 1922 I was born, the youngest of the two boys and two girls.



Dina and Benim Trzcina, parents of Gerzon



Gerzon at 4 years old with his sister Pearl.

The entire clan which comprised my family was perhaps the largest and most prominent in that town. I grew up with hundreds of aunts, uncles and cousins. My mother's maiden name was Kassel, and the Kassel lineage was extensive across an area spanning a radius of ten to fifteen miles. I counted at least three hundred people from her side of the family alone. My mother had a sister and three brothers, as well as cousins, aunts and uncles who were very prosperous. My uncle, Zelig Kassel, was the wealthiest man in town, and owned real estate and several businesses. He had houses,

factories, and every modern convenience. My other relatives also prospered through their wholesale businesses in grain, cloth, sugar, salt, fuel products, liquor, tobacco, and many other commodities. They were considered the wealthiest family in town and continued to gain wealth throughout the 1920's and 1930's. They even imported shiny, new Chevrolet trucks, the first in town, during the 1930's.

During the 1920's and 1930's I attended a few family reunions, playing and debating with my relatives. The family included surnames such as Ochman, Siegel, Hertzberg, Landau (my aunt's relatives), Holtzman (a family with seven children, whose father was involved in horse and saddle businesses), Furman (a tanner with two beautiful little girls younger than I), Wenger (with two children, a son and daughter, one who went to the university and a daughter my age), an estate-owning family by the name of Shimisky, and Ring, another prominent family in our area. Every name represented a dynasty of its own with family ties which traced back to my ancestors in Poland.

The Blenkitner Branch

Another family dynasty in my town, unrelated to my family, was that of the Blenkitners. My wife Gittel's maiden name is Blenkitner, and her relatives were also important in their town. We have heard that some of them may have survived the horrors of Hitler and escaped to Israel.

One of Gittel's uncles would later come to our rescue by sending us the necessary papers to allow us to live in the United States. This uncle, Jacob, left his home for the United States in 1913, and lived as a young man in Boston and raised a family in America. After World War II he sponsored our entrance to the United States, an act for which we are eternally grateful. In the States he shortened his name to Blank, but his original name was Blenkitner. His brother, Gittel's father, and the rest of his side of the family perished during the Holocaust, and the only offspring who survived is my wife. Although Jacob's many aunts, uncles and cousins disappeared as casualties of the war, by some miracle of fate my wife was spared.

Gittel Blenkitner was born in 1922 in Mlawa, Poland, about 25 miles from my town of Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, and I happened to meet her in northern Russia during the 1940's. I often marvel at the fact that we grew up so near each other, since she lived just some miles away from my town in Poland, yet we never met. When Hitler's forces attacked Poland and we both escaped to the Russian side, we did meet in 1940, to eventually become husband and wife. I believe very strongly this was the hand of fate.

The Blenkitner dynasty in pre-war Krasnosielc was a huge family presence. Gittel's father, Shimon Blenkitner, was born about 4 miles from our town in a village called Dronzevo, as was Jacob, his brother who eventually escaped

to America. From Dronzevo the family moved to Chorzele. Gittel's father later moved away to Mlawa and married a woman from there, the same town where my father was born.

Shimon's first wife died in 1918 following the birth of their first son Gedalia. Shimon then fell in love with his wife's younger sister Sarah, and Sarah's feelings were the same for him. Although she was engaged to be wed to another man, she broke the engagement to marry Shimon.

They had a daughter Gittel, born in 1922, and four more children after that - three boys, Zurich, Yitzhach and Aaron, and one girl, Rifka.



Sarah Blenkitner, mother of Gittel.

Sarah was quite superstitious, and early in her marriage she felt that the ghost of her sister was watching her and angry with her. Gittel recalls when her newborn baby brother cried incessantly for weeks, her mother believed that someone had cast an evil eye on him, and Sarah took him to a woman in the town to remove the evil spells. Sarah worried about improperly raising her sister's son Gedalia and feared repercussions from the ghost of her sister, and so Gedalia was treated with extra care and spoiled by his parents. Sarah was a very sickly woman after childbirth, suffering from constant migraine headaches, gallstones and a hernia, but Shimon worshipped her and treated her like a queen.

Mlawa was a city situated in the north of Poland five miles from the German-Prussian border. The Blenkitners were living there in 1920 when Poland became a separate state. By that time, Shimon's brother Jacob Blenkitner had already immigrated to the United States.

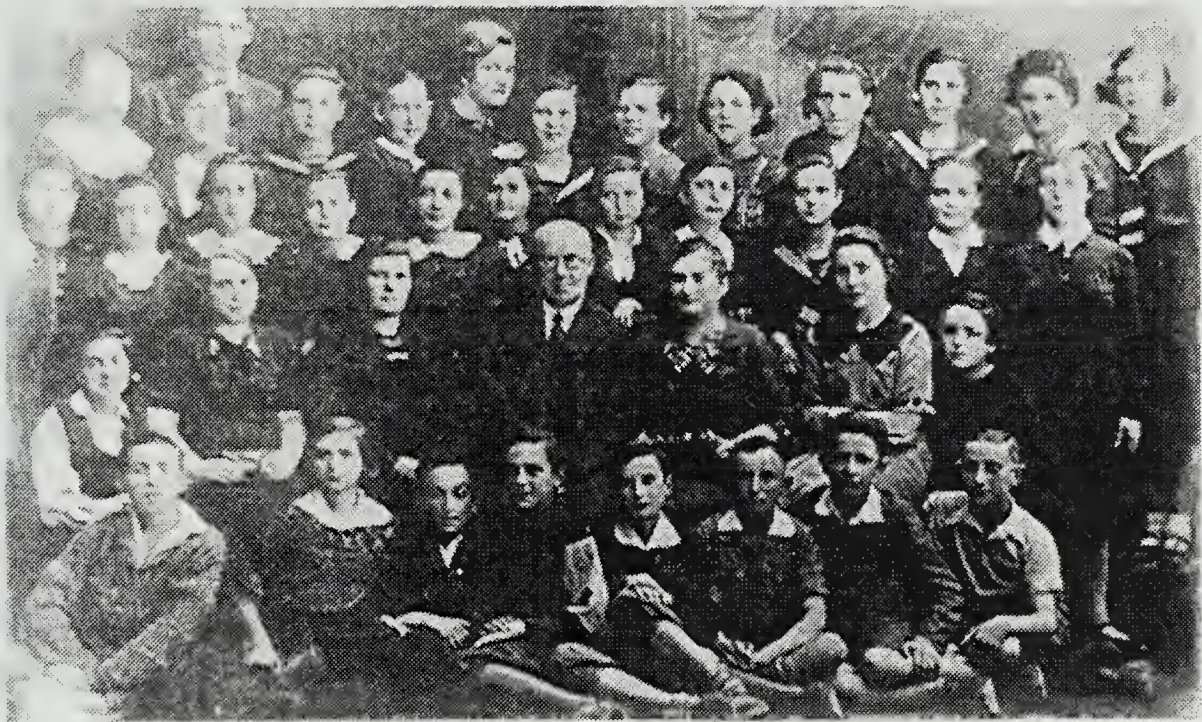
The Blenkitner family owned a shoe business in Mlawa. They were quite wealthy for their day. Their daughter Gittel attended the public school and also received some Hebrew education. Following primary school her parents sent her to a dressmaker to apprentice as a seamstress.

The family had a number of servants and workers at home and in their business. The family was also extremely religious and followed the strictest rules of an orthodox Jewish home. No one was to work or even turn on a lamp or light a fire on the Sabbath day.

As a child, Gittel worked hard to please her sickly mother. Her mother suffered from her illnesses which basically debilitated her, so Gittel pitched in in every way she could. She scrubbed floors until they glowed. She cared for her siblings and cleaned house. Her greatest pleasure was to

make her mother happy.

Gittel was an obedient child who strived to please her parents. She also loved to read. Once, though, when she was in the town library by herself selecting books, a man appeared from among the shelves of books and tried to rip her clothes off her. Gittel ran away, but when he finally caught her and said, "Now I have you!" she screamed and screamed and her attacker fled. By the time people arrived at the scene the man had disappeared. To this day Gittel remembers that experience vividly.



Gittel with her primary school class in Mlawa, Poland, seated second row, last girl on the right.

When the war broke out everything the Blenkitners had built was destroyed and the Germans quickly overtook the town - a town with a Jewish population of approximately ten thousand. Mlawa was a substantial commercial center, and when the Germans entered they confiscated anything of value, swept through the Jewish community like wild dogs, and, amid beatings and murders, plundered the town. One day they grabbed Gittel's twenty-two-year-old brother Gedalia from among the youths to join a work group. Many were

brutalized and badly beaten and returned to their homes at day's end horribly bruised and bloodied, some near death. Gedalia's parents decided at that moment that Gittel and her brother must escape like others they had heard of who found refuge on the Russian side.

Shimon accompanied his eldest son and daughter to a town near the border and made arrangements with some Poles for them to be assisted in an escape to safety across the border in the dark of night. This guide service was big business for Poles during this period. What frequently happened, though, was that upon nearing the border the fleeing Jews were attacked by border patrols, robbed and beaten. But this did not discourage many from trying because, if successful in crossing the border, the Russian side meant safety for escaping Jews.

Shimon Blenkitner left his two eldest children near the border, in the hands of a few Poles who had been paid to escort them across the border so that they might escape to the Russian side. Shimon, however, returned to Mlawa, to his wife and younger children who planned to remain in town, believing they were unable to make the arduous and dangerous journey.

Gittel and Gedalia began their escape in the middle of the night, but were abandoned by their Polish guide after awhile and left wandering in the woods all night long. They were lucky to have not been shot by German patrols. The ordeal was horrifying for the two inexperienced teenagers.

The Russians impeded the entry of refugees by setting up patrols on their side as well. If caught, refugees were often forced to return to the Germans, but some never returned at all because they were immediately shipped to concentration camps or shot on sight. Gittel and her brother

remained near the border, and one day the Russians allowed a small group to cross to their side, and the two young Blenkitners were among them.

They settled in Bialystok, a city that had been occupied by the Russians in 1939. The city was already teeming with hundreds of thousands of homeless refugees, and most lived in the streets, in the corridors of buildings, on doorsteps, anywhere they could make some room for themselves. The city was in total chaos, with kitchens set up on the streets by relief organizations to help feed the people. There were no jobs and there was no semblance of order in the city. Some individuals lived off the few belongings they carried, selling these in exchange for bread and other necessities. The situation worsened daily. For those who possessed Polish currency, the purchasing power diminished drastically, prices increased, and eventually the Russians decided to disallow the Polish currency altogether and overnight the money was totally useless.

Various organizations, including the Russian government, attempted to cope with the severe refugee situation in Bialystok. While life was miserable, at least the refugees were physically safe from terrible harm. At one point, people were allowed to register for two-year labor contracts in deep Russia on various construction projects. Some signed up, but most did not.

The two young Blenkitners in Bialystok had nowhere to sleep, food was scarce, but somehow they survived with the hope that someday the rest of the family would join them. They never did.

In 1940, Mlawka, the town where the Blenkitner family remained, was designated by the Germans a closed Jewish ghetto. This information came later by messenger in a

letter the two young Blenkitners received in Bialystok.

During our searches after the war, we learned through some who survived the tortures of the concentration camp in Auschwitz, that Gittel's father ended up there. According to some sources, Gittel's mother and her brothers and sister were rounded up right in Mlawa and taken to the concentration camp known as Treblinka to be immediately exterminated, but her father was pulled out of that group to be used in the work details. We learned of these terrible details one day when Gittel was in Germany at a municipal office. A man approached her and asked her if she was the girl Gittel from Mlawa. He was also from her town and had recognized her. She barely recognized this man, but he went on to tell her that he had been in Auschwitz with her father. He recounted how her father became completely demoralized when he lost contact with his family, and when eventually her father fell ill from the overwork and depression he suffered at the concentration camp, he asked this man to promise to tell Gittel and Gedalia, if he ever saw them, what happened to their father and family. The man said that Gittel's father died when the hard labor, starvation and illness at the camp overtook him. He also confirmed that the rest of her family had been killed early on, and that Shimon had told him that his heart was broken when he had to say good-bye to Gittel and Gedalia near the border.

So, as far as we can tell, from this tremendous Blenkitner clan, only Jacob and his niece Gittel survived. All the rest were collected by the Nazis, sent to concentration camps, and killed.



Gertrude Gerzon, born Gittel Blenkitner

It is interesting to examine the backgrounds of those who did not survive the Holocaust and those who did. During his early years, while growing up in pre-Poland prior to World War I, Jacob Blenkitner and his brother Shimon, two years his junior, faced the military draft into the Russian army. Times were already becoming dangerous and many attempted to settle in the United States by any means possible. Although borders were theoretically closed, with permission to enter the U.S. many could immigrate.

When Jacob was already in the Russian army in 1913, prior to World War I, he knew he was doomed if he stayed, so he decided to desert. He slipped away from the army confines, and cleverly escaped his headquarters in deep Russia and returned to the town of Chorzele. His parents concealed him for a very short time, but they feared for their own safety because they would be severely punished for abetting a deserter of the Czar's army. They urged him to turn himself in and return to the service. Jacob knew that if he did that he would face a firing squad. Jacob ignored the advice and went into hiding. The town in which he chose to hide was my town, Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, with his aunts and uncles, and Jacob even met my parents before I was born, and they became friends.

For at least a few weeks he remained in my town, trying to obtain money for an escape. He pleaded with his parents to give him the necessary funds to sneak over the border to Germany, and then from Germany he could easily purchase a place on a boat to the United States. His father, however, disagreed with him and would not help him to leave. Nevertheless, his mother secretly gathered the family's savings and gave Jacob what he needed to complete his escape plan. In 1913 Jacob managed to find a ship making a trans-Atlantic crossing about to depart from Germany. This act saved his life, for his future would most likely have been

death by the firing squad as a deserter or as a casualty of World War I. His mother's actions established that lifeline in the U.S. for the only other Blenkitner family survivor, Gittel. Eventually all the other Polish Blenkitners would be decimated in the Holocaust.

With Jacob's departure from Poland, the remaining older son Shimon was obliged to bear the burden of helping his parents carry on their shoe-making business and supporting his aging parents as well as his own family during the next 25 years, while Jacob Blank lived in America with no other link or responsibility for their well-being beyond infrequent letters to them.

When World War II ended, we could not locate any surviving European Blenkitners. When we located Jacob in America in 1946, we wrote to him and he fulfilled his familial responsibility by helping us enter and settle in the United States. This is what Jews call a "mitzvah" - a great deed. This was his great *mitzvah* to us. From 1913-1939 his brother and sister struggled in Poland while he lived in America, established a successful life, accumulated possessions, raised a family of five children, and spent a fruitful and prosperous life. But Jacob remembered the debt of his family roots in Poland that needed to be repaid, and fate made it possible for him to repay that debt through us.



Jacob Blank (born Blenkitner)

Chapter 2

Pre-War Poland

Growing up Jewish in Pre-War Poland

My town, Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, must have grown out from the river, since the oldest and most developed parts clustered around the Orzyc River valley. The river was the source of water for life and industry before my time. In the center of town was a cobblestoned market square, and in the middle of the square towered a massive brick building which housed the fire department and theater and public stage. Surrounding this city square were businesses and residences of the Jewish population. Ninety per cent of that town was occupied by Jews.

There also stood a magnificent Jewish temple utilized by the two Jewish sects, shared and divided equally between the orthodox and conservative congregations. The town also had its share of small Hasidic Jewish cliques, and various political groups, extreme left to extreme right. The Jews in that town numbered about three thousand.

Although not a particularly large town, it was commercially active and everyone made a good living. Like any town population, inhabitants ranged from lower to upper middle class. Jewish businesses also employed many gentile Polish workers. The town was a mosaic of shoe shops, clothiers, distributors, retail and wholesale stores, restaurants and clubs, both social and political.

In the corner of the town square stood the administration building for the municipality. One side of town, near the river, was dominated by a massive flour mill which was also

owned by a number of Jewish partnerships. It employed many Polish workers and produced its own electric power. Villagers and visitors from neighboring areas brought their grain to be ground at the mill for flour. Many sections of the town were not yet electrified, and homes still used gas and kerosene lamps.

In another section of town, Bridge Street emanated from a bridge which crossed the river to the outskirts of town and beyond. From that bridge one could travel to the large village of Dronzevo, towns like Jadnerezec, and beyond to the large town of Przasnysz, and on to Mlawa, which was situated about thirty miles from our town. Not far from Przasnysz was another Jewish town called Chorzele. That town was also home to a substantial Jewish population and was located only two miles from the German-Prussian border. This border town of Chorzele was situated just twenty miles away. In other words, the German border was located a mere twenty miles to the north of my home town.

Sixty miles to the south of us lived the largest Jewish population, in the city of Warsaw, the national capitol. In 1937, of the 1.5 million inhabitants of Warsaw, roughly 500,000 were Jews. Between Krasnosielc Mazowiecki and Warsaw lay many smaller towns. Twenty miles away stood Makow Mazowiecki, then Pultusk, a larger town. To the southeast, approaching Russia, towns included Ostrolenka, Lomza, and fifty miles away were Bialystok, Kovno, Gorodno, and dozens of towns heavily populated by Jews.



Map of the region around Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, Poland.

The non-Jewish population in my town lived primarily in the outskirts of town. Two miles down my street towards the highway, *Ulitza Volnozsche*, which means Freedom Street, stood an imposing stone Catholic church surrounded by a wrought iron fence, and it was here that all the Catholic families had their festivals and weddings and religious ceremonies. I recall watching numerous religious processions pass through my street towards the church. The church belonged to the Catholic archdiocese and housed several priests and nuns. It was landscaped with ponds stocked with fish and surrounded by a stone wall about six feet high with numerous gateways. The grounds were endowed with fruit trees and vegetable gardens. During the summer these gardens were leased to private entrepreneurs who sold the produce from their farming of the land. Every year, for a small entrance fee, we were allowed to use the grounds for picnics and purchase the products cultivated from the gardens and the carp from the fish ponds. Jews purchased the carp to prepare a Sabbath delicacy called *gefilte fish*. Only the rich could afford it, however.

In my day, the Catholic archdiocese was very friendly with the Jewish population and extremely cooperative. I recall an elderly priest who occasionally came to our house, and we had discussions with members of the church and carried on business with the church. Later, however, when that elderly priest died, some younger priests took over the management of the church. Throughout Poland, we were finding that the general cooperative atmosphere was dissipating and growing jealousy of the Jews led to hatred. The younger priests began to speak with more hostility toward the Jewish population in my town. The words of their sermons stirred up prejudices. Though not directly inciting disturbances, as the saying goes, "words can kill", and the animosities which they stirred up would kill in the future.

What I witnessed in the changing of the Poland of my youth was probably occurring throughout the country and beyond, with the rise to power of Adolph Hitler in 1933. Conditions gradually worsened. The majority of the Christian congregation who attended services in that great church began to form several right wing organizations who preached against Jewish businesses. They warned that Jews would take over Poland because the Jewish population had already reached ten percent of the Polish population by that time. Like Pharaoh in Egypt who feared the growing power of the Jews, the pharaohs of the twentieth century felt the need to destroy, first economically, then psychologically, and eventually physically, more than three million Polish Jews. It appeared that the priests' prejudices contributed significantly to the extremist feelings which arose at the time of Hitler's takeover of Europe. Religious extremism proved to be a major contributor to hatred, and, at least for that period, the "love thy neighbor" messages in the Christian Bible did not include the Jewish neighbors.

In early 1933 Polish Jews watched with great forboding as Hitler rose to power in Germany. We could sense that his influence would affect us in the future. 1933 was also the year that brought the sad news of the death of our president, Josef Pilsudski, and the announcement of new elections in 1934. During the following months several political parties grew active and jockeyed for a position in the new government.

Our families were still quite comfortable and making a good living. My uncle Pinchas Kassel returned from military service in the Polish army with a rank of corporal. As was the custom for young men in our time, he was to be the groom in a prearranged marriage with a rich woman from a family of grain barons. He received a \$15,000 dowry when he married the only daughter in that family. This was the

start of his new life. He acquired property from his grandfather since he was the youngest son and most in need of assistance to begin his new life.

The wedding arrangements were elaborate. Uncle Pinchas was a handsome, intelligent man. Hundreds of guests attended the wedding, including the many clans that comprised our family. I was almost seven years old at that wedding, and that is where I realized how large our family was.

Pinchas used wisely his grandfather's estate. He built a two-story commercial building. He leased the top floor of the building to the municipality as school space. The bottom floors were rented out as apartments, except for the apartment he kept for his grandfather to spend his last years, as well as the apartment for his family. To round out his business operations, Pinchas imported a Chevrolet truck from the United States so he could begin a trucking and transport business. He hired a mechanic and he drove the truck, transporting goods and services from town to town, with frequent trips to Warsaw. He prospered in his business.

As for me, I grew very interested in photography and built my own camera at the age of eleven. I was very handy and enjoyed learning by doing. As a pre-teenager one day, when I accompanied my mother to Warsaw on one of her business trips in my uncle's Chevrolet truck, I waited for her in front of a photography shop. I noticed the optical and photographic equipment and supplies and entered the store. I bought a lens suitable for photography and within a few months I had built my own camera. I also purchased the various chemicals and materials for completing the photographic processes. In our home was a room that was not frequently used and rather dark, so I asked my parents if I could make that my darkroom. They agreed. I experimented in my labo-

ratory with the chemistry and photographics, and found it quite fascinating.

This hobby, though, could not interfere with my schooling, and I diligently attended the public and Hebrew schools. I was oblivious at first to the political turmoil our country was entering, but later, nearer election time, I noticed more the political climate and upheavals. The competing parties were ruthlessly struggling for votes. Socialists, democrats, Jewish parties, the Bundt, the PPS, the fascist parties and others sought to advance their causes during the upcoming elections. As in all elections, promises were made, which would later be broken, and Jews were still allowed to participate in the voting process.

I spent time with a few friends whose families were politically active. My best friend was a classmate by the name of Mordechai Zarivach, the only son in his family, a boy my age. He was very bright. His father was a member of the Bundt, the Jewish socialist organization. Mordechai and his family and I had many political discussions during the campaigns, and I learned about politics from an adult viewpoint.

The elected president who succeeded Pilsudski was a military officer from the Polish aristocracy by the name was Shmigly-Rydz. He tended to follow the right-wing policies and positions. At the same time we heard more and more of Hitler's rise to political power in Germany. Our radios rang with his rhetoric and ravings, many anti-semitic and anti-democratic, and certainly against many other countries when he announced that Germany and he would conquer the world and their empire would be like Napoleon's.

My friends and I frequently debated the politics of the day. One neighbor of ours was a family with four sons.

The father was a chauffeur. Occasionally he drove my uncle's truck. His name was Chapnekevitch. His sons were about my age, and we played and talked together whenever we could. Another good friend, whose father was a tailor, had me to his house a few times. He was very intelligent so we talked politics, a subject which at first I was not very interested in, but our discussions opened my eyes to the fascinating developments of our time.

In 1933, after our own presidential elections and following Adolph Hitler's takeover of the German government and the beginning of blatant hatred preaching against selected groups, many organizations allied with Polish religious groups, perhaps sent as emissaries or agents of the German government to assist in fomenting hatred. These negative forces included government officials infected with these prejudices, who transformed friendship and cooperation to manipulation and pressure on Jewish businesses. Many laws were passed which were directed particularly against Jewish business enterprises. I recall a government official elected from the Polish parliament around 1935, Madame Pristarova, who enacted legislation targeted at weakening the Jewish meat and poultry businesses.

Other adverse legislation affected the educational system, and established quotas to limit the number of Jews allowed to enter institutions of higher learning. Naturally, the parliamentarians who passed these laws were predominantly Poles who were infected with the anti-semitic disease.

Jewish enterprises suffered, but were not completely defeated. Jews simply bowed under the oppression and worked harder to survive. But eventually the adverse legislation which these entrepreneurs faced daily pushed them into relocating to friendlier countries with more favorable business climates. My friend whose father was a tailor was

among those who chose this route. His father, with the valuable trade of tailor, immigrated alone to France, in hopes of sending for his family once he was settled in the country. In Paris, he established a good business and became a French citizen. He then sent for his wife and son. The paperwork and visas were difficult to obtain, but eventually they left. I missed my friend, but was grateful for that friendship for providing me with political awareness.

Later I befriended another boy whose parents were active in the Polish Zionist socialist organization. I occasionally attended their club. Here, too, I learned their political points of view. My political curiosity and knowledge grew significantly this way.



*Gerzon in Poland with Zionist youth group
(seated, front row, far right)*

I personally received a public education from age four to fourteen. At the age of four I entered Hebrew school and at seven I entered public school, as mandated by the law of the land. Each day I attended both Hebrew and public schools. The Jewish children were integrated in classrooms with Polish gentiles, but even in those early years I could feel

the hostility and alienation among the children, not only by observing the subtle behaviors, but in the incidence of fights and the anger and reactions of the teachers who were predominantly non-Jewish and who harbored anti-semitic feelings of their own. Some were less subtle than others. When a Jewish student earned an "A" he was rarely granted that grade, since the most a Jew was allowed to receive was a "B". That was the norm.

In numerous classes, through remarks and jokes and jabs among the educators and the students, we Jews could feel the hatred and the support for violent confrontations between Jews and gentiles.

Riots and strikes were on the rise. Those who saw the handwriting on the wall fled the country. They knew the situation was worsening and dangers approached. Poland faltered in power while Germany strengthened. As the most talented people left the country, Poland could not maintain its economic and technological edge.

Those who did choose to leave Poland were a different breed from those who remained. Although they knew they would suffer certain hardships by leaving the country, they were usually financially able to make the journey and had a more adventurous spirit. To discourage this brain drain in Poland, as well as the capital flight caused by those who took their possessions with them, laws were enacted which limited the number of exit visas issued. But in the face of the growing power and divisiveness of the right wing in Poland, all the sacrifices were well worth the economic and personal freedoms people expected to find in other countries.

More and more I heard about and personally saw the eruption of street fights, riots and looting throughout Poland. Most of these were aimed at minorities. I recall one instance

where military maneuvers were planned near my town. Polish soldiers marched through the town and began their maneuvers in the corn fields and villages nearby. At night, after their military exercises, they roamed the town. Although they did not carry their guns, they did wear their bayonets. After a few drinks they raised a ruckus in the town. Whoever they encountered they slashed with their bayonets, especially Jews with beards. The anti-semitic rage was in full flame. Local police were powerless or unresponsive. The government was apathetic. The judicial system was lenient. And, socially, these outbreaks were a source of jokes and public comedies.

Even I, as a young teenager, could see that the fiber of the country was degrading dangerously.

The non-Jewish students in the schools began to mimic their parents' actions and prejudices. They overtly scorned the Jews, initiated fights, and teachers overtly discriminated against the Jewish students. The right wingers fought the left wingers, and students like me were the victims trapped in the middle of the struggle. I personally was embroiled in some of these fights.

In spite of all these difficulties, we tried to take life in stride and endure the pain which went along with our race.

After completing school, I decided I would not remain in the town. My parents had decided I would continue my education in a Hebrew school and become a rabbi. I had had enough Jewish education and wanted more from life. I wanted to support myself and learn a trade. I decided to leave town and live in the capitol city of Poland. My parents were strongly against this move, but I was determined. I devised my own plans for leaving home and living in Warsaw for further study to learn a trade.

During my early teens I did my best to earn and save money. I was a young entrepreneur who analyzed situations where I could sell items at a profit. I observed that business-people ventured into the small villages and purchased animal skins from local hunters, which were later sold through warehouses in the larger towns. I decided I could do the same, though on a smaller scale. I took my savings and purchased furs from these villagers at a slightly better price than others were offering them. I then transported these furs to warehouses in Warsaw when I accompanied my mother on her weekly trips to the city. While in Warsaw, I studied the fur market, learned what were the asking prices of pelts, and calculated how I could optimize my profits and remain in demand. With these factors carefully weighed, I sold my furs to the contacts I had established in the city. I continued this operation quite successfully for a couple of years. When the larger-scale fur distributors heard about my dealings they were upset with me for taking away some of their business, but, in my mind, business was business. I paid the villagers more and I charged the factories less, and we were all satisfied. It was all fair trade.

I faithfully saved my profits from my small enterprise. When I felt I had enough to venture out on my own, and after I graduated school, I planned my escape to the big city. I informed my parents that I would not continue to attend Hebrew school as they wished. They were not very pleased.

Independence in Warsaw

The following week I accompanied my mother to Warsaw on her weekly business run, but when it was almost time to leave I announced to her that I would not be returning home. I was fourteen years old; I was a grown man. I had the funds to survive for a while, I planned to find a job, and I would rent a place to live in Warsaw. I reassured my mother that if I could not succeed within two weeks I would return home. Under these conditions she grudgingly agreed. She knew that I had become a determined young man whose mind would not be changed.

She left me there with a family that she knew on Sherakovska 6 who owned a shop and were business acquaintances of our family. This family was delighted to help me, and in return I would pay them a weekly fee for room and board. They had two daughters and a son. One of the daughters worked in a photography shop retouching negatives and photos. The son worked with his father in the family grocery store. The younger daughter was a teenager a little younger than I. I paid the parents five *zlotys*, or about one dollar per week.

The following day I bought a newspaper and began combing the ads for employment. That very day I was hired by a tailor shop on Mila Street which specialized in button-holes. Garments were brought into their shop to have their button-holes made. The shop needed a delivery boy for the finished garments, and they also promised to teach me how to use the machinery to make the button-holes. They offered me a good weekly pay and the promise of further training.

During that first week I was merely the delivery boy, received no training, and I was not happy with my progress. At the end of the week I resigned. I collected my week's pay

and the following week applied for another job advertised in the newspaper. This time, a small factory on Zamenhoff Street which built velvet-lined cases, *futerols*, was hiring someone to learn the trade. Two partners owned the factory, a Hasidic Jew and a modern Jew. They employed twenty-five to thirty workers in the factory.

When I arrived at the worksite, there were about fifty people in line ahead of me applying for the same job. The owners decided to give practical tests as a basis for hiring. Each candidate was to demonstrate his manual dexterity and skillfulness by fabricating something using carpentry tools. Each was given his turn and sent away with the message that the owners would call if they needed him. When my turn came around they told me my assignment, a woodworking project where I was required to use my carpentry skills and imagination to fabricate a product they described. Fortunately I was an experienced woodworker, and they grinned with satisfaction when they saw my work. They offered me the job and asked me what salary I desired. I doubled my first job's salary. They hired me with the promise that I would be evaluated on a monthly basis and would receive salary increases based on my merit.

I was thrilled to get this job. I would be building things, using my skills. I made new friends at the factory. I received raises every month and also expanded my network of contacts among the highly prosperous Jewish community of Warsaw. In the course of my deliveries and order-taking I became acquainted with many companies and businesspeople. I received frequent tips from these businesses for delivering orders efficiently, on time, and undamaged.

One particular firm was very fond of me, a loan company for people who made purchases on installment plans. Customers who wanted to buy bicycles or jewelry or furni-

ture or other luxury items used this financing company to pay for these items. This was a major company in the area, and the staff spoke only Polish. Fortunately, thanks to my public school education, in addition to speaking Yiddish, the language we spoke at home which is similar to German, I spoke Polish quite well, too. They were pleased I spoke both languages, but I spoke primarily Polish to them. They even liked my accent, which I suppose had a northern twang with rural inflections and expressions, which they evidently found amusing.

After three months of employment with the velvet case factory, I arrived one day at the plant with my fellow employees only to find two locks securing the front door. A note posted on the door informed us that the factory was closed and we were all out of work. We would have to seek employment elsewhere. We were shocked because the business had been thriving. We later learned that the Orthodox Jewish partner had major conflicts with the Conservative Jewish partner and they dissolved the business due to their irreconcilable differences. By law, both partners were required to put up locks as a symbol of the end of the partnership. This was a sad day for me.

But I did not despair. I planned a different strategy this time. Rather than search the want ads again, I decided to utilize my many business contacts to find another job. The first office I approached was that finance company office, since they had frequently mentioned that if ever I needed work I should contact them. When I made my request for employment leads they were already aware of my plight and explained to me the circumstances of the closing of my former company. This was my first encounter with a situation where even people of the same race and background disregard their common roots and by emphasizing their differences end up destroying each other. I have seen this

many times hence. Individuals, religious groups, and entire countries do the same, and violence or wars result.



Gerzon living independently in Warsaw in 1937.

The factory closing was fortuitous after all. My new position with the financing company included another substantial raise in salary and increased responsibilities. I tackled each new assignment with enthusiasm and resourcefulness, and I succeeded. I was almost fifteen years old.

Another fringe benefit of my new job was a 24-hour pass for the city streetcar system. I took advantage of this privilege and familiarized myself with the region. I explored

Praga, the part of Warsaw behind the Vistula River in the old section of town. I visited many parts of the region and learned all about them. I ran some risks in my travels, because it was dangerous for a Jewish boy to enter certain areas of Warsaw, but I did not look much like a Jewish boy and dressed like a typical Polish boy, and I spoke perfect Polish.

My duties increased at the company, and I was also assigned the distribution of late notices and the collection of late payments on the installment plans. Because of all the traveling involved in my work, I became quite knowledgeable of Warsaw and its environs.

Next to the street where I worked stood the largest Jewish temple, the Tlomatska Shul, a splendid piece of architecture which came to life during the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays with cantors and choirs singing. Occasionally I attended the shul, but my work hours were extended to also include part of Saturday, too. I took my work very seriously.

In the same courtyard of buildings was located a photographic studio. When I had any spare time, I visited the studio to observe the innovations in the field of photography and inquire about available part-time work for me. At first they hesitated to hire me, and they looked at me skeptically. I described my photographic experience, but they were involved in mass production. Nevertheless I persisted, and occasionally they took me up on my offer to work. The Leica camera emerged as the latest photographic innovation, with 35 mm. photography. Business was booming for them.

Another company in that business area, at Tlomatska 13, came to know me well, a thriving factory which produced straw and felt hats for men and women. They also approached me to work for them in their production facilities.

They gave me a guided tour of their factory, a unionized plant. The proprietor insisted on hiring me even though the union would not approve. Adding the enticement of doubling my present wages, he and his brother tried to convince me to work for them. I made some quick mental calculations and realized that my present salary and expenditures still left little room for saving money, so I eventually took them up on their offer. I gave my notice to the finance company and entered the hat business.

The union laborers were not too pleased with my presence. They sneered at me, Jews and gentiles alike. But I was content with the position because union shops worked only five days per week, and I looked forward to having my weekends off so that I could study and pursue my interests in photography. My former employer was furious and even complained to my new boss about hiring me. Although I hated to see them argue, I could not help but feel proud that people were fighting over me. When my former employer glared at me each time I passed, I still enjoyed the feeling of being in demand.



Gerzon with his sister Pearl in Warsaw in 1937.

Chapter 3

The Political Backdrop

With the additional leisure time, I utilized the libraries and continued my self-education. I also offered to apprentice without pay at the photo studio, simply to gain more experience in the field, and the proprietor finally agreed. I frequented the NIVO Library of Knowledge, a public reading room. At first I spent hours in general knowledge readings, but my interests in the political areas steadily grew. Amid the growing political turbulence in Germany, politics in Poland remained business as usual. We whispered and worried about war and Hitler's takeover of countries like ours. By that time the Nazis had already conquered Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Eventually Chamberlain from Great Britain began negotiations on a non-aggression pact with Hitler. Poland's political system of today was significantly determined by those activities of the 1930's. I was fascinated by the international politics occurring around me. I later came to realize that the stance taken by France and Great Britain to exclude Russia in the wheeling and dealing prior to World War II set the stage for the future schism that would arise between the Western powers and the Soviets. At that time, Russia begged to be included in the political negotiations, because Russian leaders knew that if they were not treated as political allies they could not share the future spoils of victory.

Nevertheless, Russia was excluded. Russia, therefore, negotiated among its neighboring countries to form a separate strategic block against Germany should an attack occur. She targeted Czechoslovakia, Poland, Latvia, Lithua-

nia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and other countries. The leaders of these small countries were discouraged by British statesmen from entering any unification agreements with Russia, despite Russia's pleas that such a pact would deter Hitler's military aggression. Rumors were flying that Hitler already had plans to take over Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia. This was a strategic area because of its airplane factories and it was the backbone of Czechoslovakian industry was located in this region.

England and France were becoming increasingly right-wing politically. France began to legislate against immigrants similar to Poland's discriminatory laws against Jews. Those immigrants who entered France in the previous two-year period were targeted. They were accused of somehow undermining, and perhaps endangering, the country. Laws were passed that the many thousands of immigrants who had not yet obtained citizenship be deported to their home countries. My friend's mother, the one who had rejoined her tailor husband after he established himself in France and who had subsequently given birth to a second child in Paris, was expelled from France under this legislation. She returned with her young baby and son, but her husband remained in France because he had the citizenship required to remain. Thousands of people were uprooted in this senseless and unfair legislation.

It boggles my mind that France and England could not foresee what Hitler planned. Chamberlain traveled back and forth between England and Germany to try to appease Hitler with negotiations. All the while Hitler was negotiating with the many European countries to convince them not to enter into any alliances with other major powers, especially Russia. After England and France sided with Hitler on this subject, France, like Germany, passed anti-immigrant (i.e. anti-Jewish) laws to banish Jews from the country.

What a dilemma faced those banished from France when they attempted to reenter Poland. Poland refused to accept them on the grounds that they were no longer Polish and the economy could not absorb them anymore. They suffered the hardship of homelessness, and many were forced to set up camp along the borders and sleep on the ground there for weeks, without food and proper shelter. Eventually some charitable organizations tried to help them, but with too little too late.

Some immigrants managed to by-pass these rigid laws and enter other countries. For example, Chiang Kai-Shek opened the Chinese borders and allowed the entry of these unfortunate immigrants. But France and England appeased Hitler and ignored the plight of these people. England and France urged weak Poland to stand alone and not ally with Russia, even in the face of a mighty German threat.

When Hitler did invade a territory of Czechoslovakia, the European leaders threw Poland a bone by giving Poland a portion of the conquered country, in return for Poland not opposing Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakian Sudetenland. They were blind to the obvious - that Germany would conquer all of Czechoslovakia, and, before too long, steamroll over Poland and other European countries, too.

The United States at that time remained neutral. America had its own problems and understandably chose to isolate itself from Europe's problems. But England and France were not blameless in the events which followed. It was they who discouraged the formation of a Russian bloc which would have made a formidable deterrent to Hitler's plans of invasion. What happened instead allowed Poland to play along with Germany in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Poland appeased Hitler's discriminatory actions and even

adopted some of them, and everyone shut their eyes to the plight of the displaced Jewish refugees.

In 1938, Poland finally asked France and England the question: What will you do for us if Hitler turns around and decides to invade us? English and French diplomats responded that they would form their own protective alliance which would guarantee Poland's security. In the event of an attack, they promised they would declare war on Germany and support Poland in her efforts to fend off the invaders. This agreement polarized them from Germany, which gave Hitler the political justification for invading Czechoslovakia and Poland. In 1938, Czechoslovakia was completely overrun. Austria was entirely in the hands of Hitler's deputies. The German army advanced their military plans, and, in September 1939, Hitler attacked Poland, too.

Poland made a deal with the devil, and, in return for one year's control of that insignificant Czechoslovakian territory they had gained, Poland lost the struggle against Hitler.

Many around me made similar observations about Poland, but we were powerless to effect change. The right-wing government was supportive of Adolph Hitler. Poland's legislative and social practices were increasingly anti-semitic. Poland was a country run by Hitler sympathizers who had installed themselves in influential places between 1936 and 1939.

Hitler's agents, the internal structure of Poland, and, indirectly, France and England, made sure that Poland would be too weak to defend itself against a German invasion. Russia stood on the sidelines, unsuccessful in forming a more powerful counterthreat to the German invasion forces because no other country had accepted their offer to form an al-

liance against Hitler. Was this polarization planned by the European powers in the hopes that Russia, too, would fall? Did the Europeans really expect to make peace with Germany, and were they really more sympathetic to Germany's ideologies than they openly admitted, including anti-semitic feelings of their own? I have often pondered these questions.

Russia was finally backed against the wall. In 1939 Russia signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. Using the same tactic of promising territory to Russians as they had with Poland during the Czechoslovakian struggle, Hitler promised Joseph Stalin that Russia could take back half of Poland and be a partner in the conquest. There is an old Polish saying, "We'll be partners. I'll take the potatoes, and you'll take the potato leaves. Then I'll take the cabbages, and you take the cabbage roots." In short, one partner takes all, the other comes out empty-handed. That's how international politics worked out in the 1930's when dealing with the Germans. If only they had realized it sooner.

Chapter 4

Victims of the German Onslaught

The German Attack of Poland

In 1939 Germany and Russia signed their non-aggression pact, the Ribbentrop-Stalin Pact. In 1939 Hitler then attacked Poland. As the bombs rained on us, I found myself separated from my family in Warsaw, caught in the attack and subsequent siege of Warsaw. I stood in the doorway of my building watching the bombardment from the German Messerschmidts that flew overhead. People scolded me for not running to the bomb shelters, but I was young and fearless and felt somehow invulnerable, as young people often do, and I answered that I preferred to stand at the door so that if I saw a bomb falling on the building I would be the first one out and not be crushed by the rubble

That first week all industry was at a standstill and I was out of a job. We did not immediately lose all electric power, so the newspapers kept reporting the events and I took a job selling newspapers on the streets; but by week's end the presses stopped, too, because there was no electricity, no gas, and much of the sewer and water systems stopped functioning. The destruction of Warsaw had begun. Three quarters of the city would be demolished.

I was a teenager, just sixteen years old and alone in a city under German siege. I had been living with that same family who took me in when I decided to make my living in Warsaw. They treated me like their own son. When the war broke out, I was cut off from my own family with no knowl-

edge of what happened to them.

Three weeks into the siege of Warsaw the Polish government leaders fled to England because they realized that Poland was lost and all they could do was try to save their own skins by escaping. It was an escape of no return. The Russians enforced their part of the pact and took control of half of Poland. They marched into Poland the same time the German army did. The German army overran the country and took control of Poland within one month.

During that first week of the war as the bombs still fell all over the city, I joined the civil defense efforts and patrols. The population of Warsaw, about a million and a half people, was held captive in the city. The Jewish population numbered approximately four hundred thousand of the Warsovites. We witnessed the closing and burning of businesses and factories and much worse. Never in my life had I seen nor do I ever wish to see again such mass destruction. Buildings, horses, people hurt or destroyed. No one was safe.

For three weeks there was practically nothing to eat. People sold anything for a loaf of bread, even diamonds. The Germans dropped leaflets telling Warsaw to surrender and promising to normalize the city once surrender was declared. The damaged buildings began to crumble and collapse. Cannon fire seemed to come from anywhere, like a turkey shoot.

As I was out in the street near Platz Voronosky, one cannon ball flew right over my head, missing me by inches. It landed about 1000 feet from me with a tremendous explosion that knocked me down to the ground. When I finally got up, I found that I was slightly wounded by some of the shrapnel from the explosion. My hip had two flesh wounds, but I knew they were not serious. I cleaned them off by urinating onto my handkerchief and washing the wound with it, since

I learned once that that would disinfect the wound and help to stop the bleeding. It must have been good for it, because the wound healed quickly over the next few weeks. Some of my friends were not so fortunate. Some died instantly from cannon fire. Others were maimed.

Horror. Destruction. Then I watched the German army march victoriously into Warsaw at Platz Moronosky and the streets of Mila and Bonya Fraterska, while the people wept. The Germans promised to supply food and water, restore order, and not harm anyone.

Trucks loaded with stale black bread arrived at that same plaza. The Germans distributed food the first few days by driving their bread trucks into crowds of people and tossing out the bread over the heads of the thousands of starving city dwellers. When the people nearly trampled each other in the scramble, they fired shots to calm the ravenous crowds. First the shots were over our heads. Eventually the German soldiers shot right into the crowds of people. I witnessed these bread riots and vowed never to take anything from the Germans, no matter how hungry or desperate.

People were randomly drafted into labor details to clean up the mess left by the attack. Ninety per cent of those put to work this way were Jews. I was dragged into one once. About one hundred of us were driven to the Gdansk railroad station to lift away the heavy rubble there. There were beatings and shootings of those who did not work as hard as the Germans expected. I saw people injured and killed during this detail. After that, whenever I saw the Germans coming, I hid.

I remained in Poland for a few months after the takeover of Warsaw and watched the German treatment of the Polish people. They shot people on sight. They crippled and

brutalized people. When the German soldiers were feeling benevolent, they merely beat and overworked and verbally abused the workers. When they were in a more foul mood they simply murdered the workers when the job was complete. After my one experience with the laborers, I made sure that when the Germans rounded up new workers I was well out of their sight. I managed to avoid future work crews that way.

In Bonya Fraterska 17 where the townspeople from outside the city brought their products to sell, I heard from a sausage-maker that 2600 Jews were banished from my home town and their possessions taken from them after a massacre in the temple, and that there were no Jews left there. Anything remaining was distributed among the Germans and Poles in the town. When I heard this news I hoped that my family was safe and that I would never have to face this myself.

I later heard a story about a baker who owned a bakery on the corner of our block in Krasnosielc Mazowiecki. His name was Yitzach Lise. He had a family with three children. When I left for Warsaw in 1937, he had a thriving baking business. He married a woman from Gorodno, a town in eastern Poland which was later occupied by the Russians in 1939. When in 1939 all the Jews were expelled from Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, he and his family managed to reach the town of Gorodno. He settled in that town between 1939 and 1941 and tried to reestablish his life there after their escape from the German clutches. In 1941, when the German army advanced, they also occupied Gorodno. Again, Jews were rounded up and massacred. Lise and his family were caught in the marketplace just when women and children were separated from the able-bodied men. The SS soldiers demanded that he separate from his wife and children. He refused, and the German SS soldiers beat him with the butts of their ma-

chine guns. He grabbed one of the machine guns out of a soldier's hands and shot down a number of German soldiers. He was quickly shot down in the marketplace. Some would consider his an act of foolhardiness. I would call him a hero.

Chapter 5

The Turning Point

My uncle Zelig Kassel, his wife Chayah, and his four sons were living in Krasnosielc Mazowiecki. He was a successful businessman with numerous enterprises. Before the outbreak of World War II, they were among the richest in our town. He was my mother's brother. When the war broke out, they packed all their belongings and their family into their new Chevrolet truck and relocated to Warsaw. They had their own four-story building in Warsaw on Mirsmoshetz Street. They also had other businesses in Warsaw, including a paper factory and other real estate. To escape the war, they ran off to Warsaw, but they, too, were caught in the siege of the city, just as I was.

During the first few weeks of the siege, I had no idea they were there. When the Germans marched into the city and gained control, I was visiting one of my relatives and was told that Zelig Kassel and his family had escaped my home town and were living in one of the apartments of one of their buildings.

I paid them a visit as was allowed during daylight hours. At night, we were all under a military curfew.

The Kassels had purchased a horse and wagon, since, when they reached the city, the Polish army had confiscated their precious Chevrolet truck supposedly for use in the war effort against the Germans. Their building was slightly damaged during the bombings, so they needed to remove the debris along the side of the building. They asked me to help them in the clean-up and they would pay me for it.

The German army was already occupying Warsaw and I had little to do at that time, so I agreed to take the horse and wagon and remove the debris from the damaged building and dump it in the outskirts of the city. I did this for a couple of days, and they paid me and fed me during the day, which was helpful. I appreciated eating the prepared meals with their family, but it only lasted two days. In the evenings, I returned to my own lodging which was a three-kilometer walk from their building.

One day I encountered a drunken German soldier who was known for ravaging Jewish homes and looking for places where he could pick up some valuable items. I had seen him before in my building, and during the day he would throw things from the windows of the Jewish quarters so that the Poles could snatch them up for themselves.

I had been visiting a friend in another part of the building when I encountered the German officer. He was half-drunk probably because he had found some liquor in his plundering. He held a scissors in one hand and a Luger gun in the other. I had no chance to avoid confrontation this time.

He stopped me in the staircase and asked me in German whether I knew any Jewish families who lived in that block of apartments. I pretended that I didn't understand German, although I did, but I didn't want to disclose that I myself was a Jew. I spoke only Polish to him.

He ordered me to take off my hat. I obeyed. I had a bushy head of hair. He then proceeded to chop off chunks of my hair with his scissors. In his other hand I watched that gun carefully. My mind was racing. I didn't know what he would do next. Since I didn't give him a clear answer about the whereabouts of Jews, he could decide to finish me off

with his gun. Hopefully, he believed that I was a Polish boy and would spare me. Maybe not.

He ordered me to pick up the hair that had piled up on the floor of the steps. I was scared to death and decided within a split second to grab the gun from his hand and run. I raced up the stairs as fast as my legs could carry me, all the way to the roof level.

The block in which I lived was built like a walled city, with the main structure along the perimeter and a protected courtyard in the center. It was a few stories high, and when one reached the attic area at the top, the attic was connected to all four angles of the square and each of the four staircases. There I could hide. I knew the building very well, because during the air raids I familiarized myself with it in preparation for bombardments. There were barrels of sand near the top level for use when an incendiary bomb fell on the building. The sand would stop the spread of flames.

I ran up the stairs and down the corridors until I reached a place where I could hide. This was in the part of the building where the gas and water and sewer connections were located. I threw the gun in one of the sand barrels and covered it with the sand. My heart was beating furiously and I was so terrified that for at least two hours I crouched hidden in a hole in the basement and didn't dare to move. I had no idea what would happen next.

When two hours had passed, I decided to run away from the building back to my Uncle Zelig's home. My face must have been ashen with fright, because my cousin noticed that something was wrong. He asked why I came rushing back to them when the work was finished. I told the whole story to my cousin, who was sixteen like me, but made him promise not to tell anyone.

He was furious when he heard. He scolded me for doing such a foolhardy thing and said that the Germans would probably massacre the whole block of Jews for what I had done. He told his mother, my Aunt Chayah.

When I came up for supper, my aunt already knew what had happened, and she angrily and harshly scolded me.

She said that since the Germans have installed themselves in the city for a couple of months, many people were escaping to the Russian side. She challenged and ridiculed me. What was I doing all by myself in Warsaw anyway, she asked. She said that even they were planning to send their two eldest sons to escape in this way from the city. She continued to accuse and chastise me, and by then I really regretted what I had done. Nevertheless, what I had done in that one impulsive moment sealed my fate.

The curfew had already arrived, but I decided not to stay any longer and continue to endanger my relatives, and return to my quarters two miles away. My conscience bothered me about what I had incited for those who lived on my block in my building Sherakofkas 6. So, I took the risk of being out during the curfew.

I sneaked through all the rubble houses. It was pitch dark, with the city shut down and the abandoned buildings unlit and uninhabited. Each block had its own set of doors at the entry way, a gate which was closed after the curfew hour. During peacetime there was a buzzer that would alert a watchman to open the gate. In these days, we had to bang loudly on the door to arouse the gatekeeper to open the door.

When I reached my block, the doors were shut tight. I pounded on the gate to awaken the watchman to let me in.

Luckily the man on duty who peeked out the little window recognized me. He crossed himself and asked accusingly, "What happened? You missed the curfew. The Germans could kill you on sight." I answered that thankfully I made it, and asked him if anything unusual had happened that day. He said no. That calmed me a bit, but he could still see that I was upset about something and very nervous. He probably passed it off as my worry about being out past curfew. He opened the gate and let me in.

When they saw my face, the people I lived with told me that they wondered where I was and were worried about me. They thought I had been killed by Germans because I hadn't arrived home. I tried to sound as calm as possible and explained that I had visited my aunt who lived two miles away.

That night I decided that in the morning I would escape from Warsaw.

Prior to the incident I had no intention of escaping. I had planned to search for the rest of my family. Although I had heard that my town was empty of Jews, I still hoped to find my parents and siblings nearby. First, I would go back to my town and try to find them, but, after that, I knew I had to escape Poland.

I carried my few belongings and crossed over to Praga, over the Vistula River, and I hoped that people with horse and wagon would help me reach my destination. By foot and horse-drawn wagon I made my way back, though Praga, Pultusk and, hitching a ride with farmers, I finally reached Makow Mazowiecki, approximately 75 kilometers from Warsaw, the last town before my hometown of Krasnosielc Mazowiecki.

I found and stayed for a week with my uncle Furman who owned a tannery in Makow Mazowiecki. He had two young daughters whose picture I took at that time that I still have today. Jews were still living in Makow but there was talk about organizing a ghetto. The Germans had already occupied the town for three months. My uncle and others described in great detail what happened to the Jewish population of my home town when the blitzkrieg struck. The first day in my town, the people were overrun by the German army. The German soldiers, upon entering the town, grabbed whoever they could find, which turned out to be a group of eighty Jews, forced them into the synagogue and slaughtered them with machine guns. Among those murdered was my eighty-two-year-old grandfather, Haskell Kassel.

Following that first massacre, an order was issued that all Jews in the town were to gather in the marketplace in the town square, with only the few belongings they could carry and leaving all valuables and possessions behind. The Germans confiscated all the articles that were abandoned and distributed them as booty among themselves and the Poles who remained in the town. The Germans gave an order to this group that they leave town without being seen, otherwise they would be shot on sight.

Those people who were fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to escape this way managed to flee as refugees to the Russian side of the border through Ostrolenka, Lomza and Bialystok. I learned later that they joined the already thousands of refugees who flooded the towns along the Russian border. Although they were forced to leave all roots and possessions behind and suffer the hardships of homelessness and personal scorn and condemnation, they were probably among the most fortunate. Of the almost two hundred fifty thousand refugees, an estimated two hundred thousand survived and were able to return to Poland in 1946.

Some of them served as fighters for the underground forces. Some lost family members during the battles which ensued between Russia and Germany. But many others survived.

While in Makow Mazowiecki I learned that the Germans were abusing and taking advantage of the Jews there. They first robbed them of their businesses and goods. Then they commandeered groups of Jews to remove rubble, clean the streets, and perform other menial labor.

When I arrived in the town, the Germans grabbed me and a number of other Jewish men to clean out the Jewish temple of Makow. They had converted the temple into stables for the cavalry. The horses made a tremendous mess inside and we were assigned for a few days to remove the accumulated manure. Some of my fellow workers were beaten brutally and bloodied for not working hard enough. Those Jews with beards were more persecuted than others. Among us were several rabbis and other religious men.

I told my uncle about it and he warned that we still did not know our fate. Although he owned his tannery, he no longer worked there. I enjoyed the visit with him, but had made up my mind to return to my home town still twenty-five kilometers away.

Many urged me not to try because I would be risking my life by disobeying the German order for Jews never to return there. Although I believed them, my heart told me I should still take one last look.

To avoid danger, I took a circuitous route towards my home town. I slept on a bench in one of the villages near my town. The people kept warning me not to go any further, because there was an order that any Jew entering Krasnosielc Mazowiecki would be shot on sight.

About two kilometers from home, I met a man I knew who married before the war and had converted to Christianity. He was the only Jew who was allowed to remain in his village. I stayed with him three days and nights. He gave me a place to hide and he fed me. He told me what had happened in my town. He advised me strongly not to venture further, but to flee by sneaking through the newly established German-Russian border beyond Ostrolenka. He said I was risking death by going home. He recommended I travel only on small roads, since the main roads were flooded with military personnel and patrols of troops.

At the crossroads, rather than travel on to Krasnosielc Mazowiecki I decided to follow his advice and headed for Ostrolenka instead of home. I reached the outskirts of Ostrolenka. The bridge which had once traversed the river was destroyed, but a footbridge had been constructed to cross into nearby Narev. After that bridge it was another two kilometers past Ostrolenka to the Russian border.

I waited until nightfall and spoke to several people who had crossed the temporary bridge. They told me that when Germans found Jews they killed them on sight or sent them to some unknown destination from which they never returned. One man suggested I swim across the river at night. But it was late fall, the river was very cold, and I was not a strong swimmer. Even if I were, I wouldn't dare to do it.

The following day I decided to take my chances and try the temporary bridge while many people would be passing through. I lowered my head, my little bundle of possessions in hand, and tried to keep a low profile. I was only sixteen years old and probably quite harmless looking. Inconspicuous among the groups of people passing to and fro, I was able to sneak out unnoticed by the Germans.

On the other side of the bridge there were already many groups trying to sneak through the border. Some had money to pay Polish people to help them get across the border at night. I didn't have much money with me, so this was not an option for me. I just waited for the right moment to sneak through by myself. This was risky because I didn't know the territory. All I knew was that there were forests on both sides of a main road near the border. At night I would be quite lost.

I decided to take the chance of crossing the border by day. Some thought it would be safer to travel in groups. I decided that it would be safer to go all by myself. On a sunny afternoon I began to make my crossing. Close to the border, I heard the cough of two German patrolmen walking through the woods about fifty yards away from me. I jumped into the woods, crawled under a bush, and hid until there was no longer any sign of them. Then I picked up my pace in the direction of what I thought was the border. Luckily for me I reached a clearing at the other side of a hill overlooking two villages. There were no more forests, simply a plateau and fields looking down on the towns.

I was unsure of whether I was on the German or Russian side and it was still daylight, so I hid near a bush and waited until nightfall. As I lay there, I heard voices coming towards me. They were the voices of Polish villagers singing. As they reached me, I could tell they were only villagers, so I jumped out from behind the bush, which startled them.

I quickly explained to them in Polish that I was a boy looking for his family who I believed had crossed the border to the Russian side ahead of me. I asked them if they could tell me where I was. They listened intently and then informed me that I was already on the Russian side, but still in danger.

They were carrying baskets filled with mushrooms, gathering food for the winter. After hearing my story they explained that they came from one of the two villages down the road. They suggested I go to the other village that was about three kilometers away, and look for a building with a windmill. A man who was a converted Jew lived there with his family, and they were known for helping refugees. They advised me not to enter the windmilled homestead from the front because that family was being watched by Russians. But if I entered around the back, I would look like one of the family. There was a hole in the fence in the back that only members of the family would know about.

They took me into their group and gave me a couple of their baskets to carry to look like one of them. Their advice was good. We parted at the crossroads of the two villages and I thanked them.

I went around the back of the house with the windmill, sneaked through the fence, and knocked on the door. The people who came to the door were surprised to see me and asked where I came from. I spoke to them in my native language, Yiddish, and explained it all to them.

They were a big family with children of all ages and I walked into the hustle and bustle of milling grain to flour. They asked if I was hungry and I told them that I hadn't eaten all day. We had supper together and they gave me a place to sleep with one of their sons. They planned for the next morning when the patrols would be coming in to check on them. Although I could not stay, since it would endanger them, they did have a transport with flour headed for Lomza the following morning. I would go with one of the drivers. They would disguise me so that I wouldn't attract attention.

That night I couldn't sleep. My head was spinning

with all the details I needed to remember for the next day. I was so nervous. The son had taught me Russian answers to questions which might be asked of me by the Russian patrols. The first question, *otkuda* (where are you from), I learned to recognize and prepared my answer in Russian. *Kuda* (where are you going) was the second question. I learned to answer that, too. This would help avoid suspicion. I'll never forget those first Russian words.

Early the next morning the family dusted me all over with flour so I would look like a typical worker. Fortunately, when our wagons were stopped by the patrol, no one asked me anything, probably because I looked too young to be a threat to anyone. They did ask the wagon driver a series of questions, and he calmly explained everything.

I finally arrived in the city of Lomza about forty kilometers in on the Russian side, and began my search for people who had managed to escape from Poland and my home town. I learned that there were many who ended up in Lomza.

One of the people I came upon had been an owner of the flour mill in Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, and he and his family managed to escape and settle in Lomza, which was by then overrun with refugees. I knocked on the door of the Bordovich family, and their son who used to be a schoolmate of mine came to the door. They invited me in and were amazed to hear of my solitary escape.

I was almost out of money by then, so I stayed overnight at their house. I asked for information on the whereabouts of my family. They told me they were not in Lomza but had gone further up to Bialystok. My best bet would be to take the train which was still running to Bialystok. They helped me get my ticket and then I was on the train.

I arrived in the city of Bialystok in late fall 1939. There I searched for members of my family in a city teeming with refugees and people in distress. I did find some members of my family in Bialystok and I truly believed that the ordeal was finally over. Little did I know that it was only beginning.

I don't know whatever possessed me to grab the gun from that German soldier in Warsaw, but that instant sealed my future. The turn of events led me to Zelig and Chayah Kassel and their strong urging for me to escape Warsaw. I am grateful to them for being so harsh with me because it helped me survive. I searched for that family during and after the war to express to them my thanks, but there was never another trace of any of them. None of them survived, and they probably met their deaths in the Warsaw Ghetto siege which followed my departure and killed thousands of Jews. Perhaps the two eldest sons survived by escaping, as Aunt Chayah had planned. But even if they did make it to the Russian side, I had heard rumors that the Russian armies drafted young men like them into their army and perhaps they were pulled into battle. After an exhaustive search following the war, I never uncovered any information about any of them. They probably all perished.

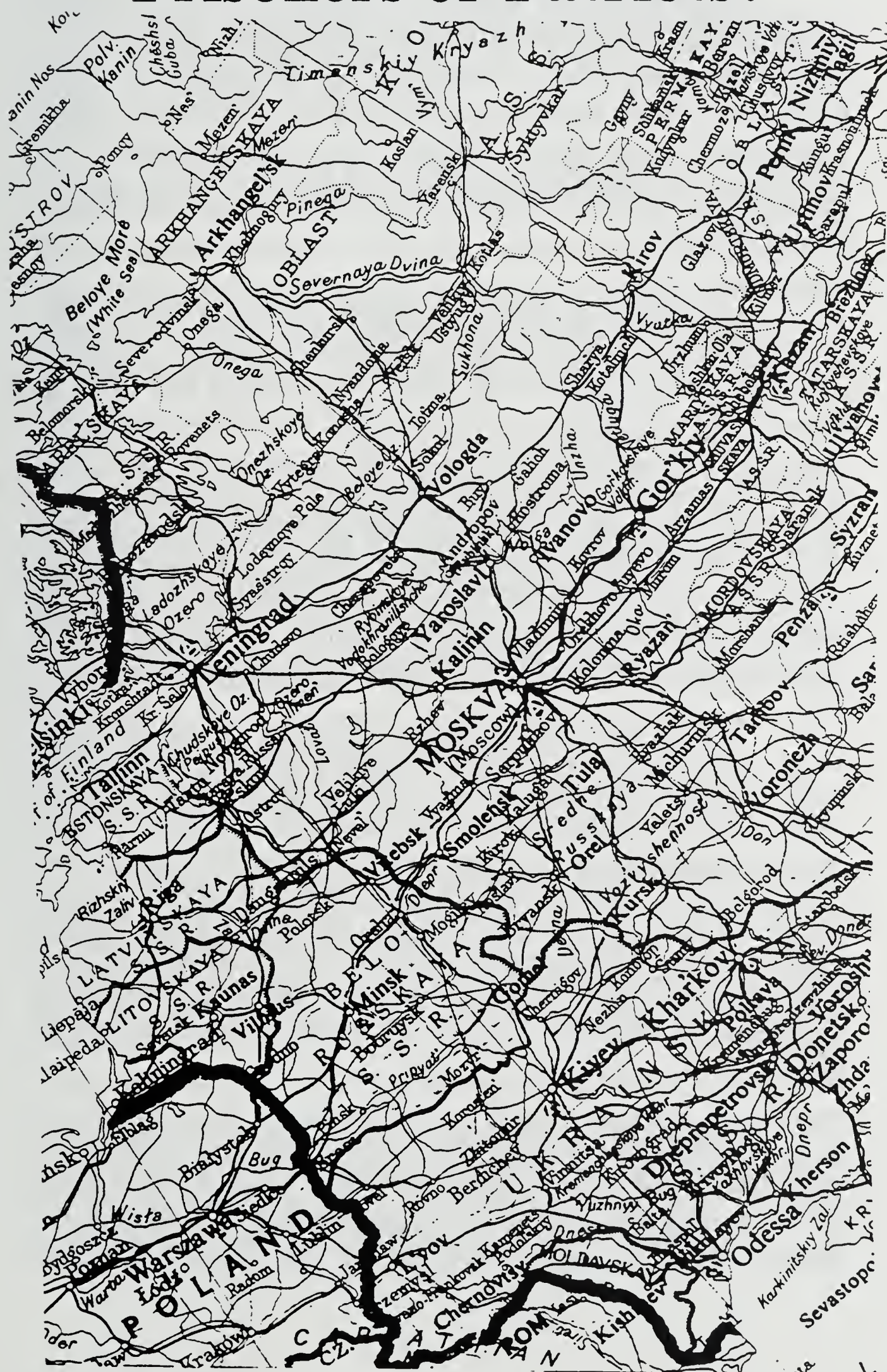
To this day, I think of them and how fate pointed me in the right direction. At the time I was angry with Chayah for speaking so cruelly to me, but she was my guardian angel who helped me make the decision to escape Poland and survive. I will be forever grateful.



Escaping east from Warsaw.

Chapter 6

Prisoners or Patriots?



Welcome to Bialystok

Many Jews fled German-occupied Poland. Refugees who escaped to Russian Poland found that the Russians actually welcomed them. Hundreds of thousands of Jews flooded the newly created Russian territory, settling in cities and towns such as Kovna, Rovna, Lvov, and Bialystok, but these cities did not have sufficient housing for the newly arrived refugees.

Crossing the border, a different picture lay before me: hundreds of thousands of homeless, hungry, helpless refugees. People slept on the streets, in building hallways, in schools and in synagogues. The native Jewish population of these cities became annoyed with the overflow of Jews, and many looked upon the new arrivals as a plague on their lifestyle. They cursed the refugees for the discomfort of their own lives, and sought ways to be rid of them. They insulted and ridiculed their new homeless people. They shunned and scorned them, instead of welcoming and helping them.

Jews held administrative positions in the Russian government in these territories. When I settled in Bialystok, although only a teenager myself, the Russian leaders in Bialystok appointed me to place refugees in newly established jobs. I took in about a half dozen workers and found them jobs where I worked. I was dismayed to find that the natives of the town, Jews themselves, did not try very hard to employ the refugees. In fact, they tried even harder to be rid of us new arrivals.

I learned that members of my family had managed to cross the border and I eventually located them. I found some of my uncles and aunts, including Pinchas Kassel and his family. He, too, was driven out of his home town and

stripped of his possessions, but he was managing to survive on the Russian side. He later applied for a Russian passport and became a Russian citizen with a paragraph included in his passport explaining his origin. But with this passport came the requirement to leave the city and relocate to far-away Sloniyu in Byelorussia.

In Bialystok I also found my other uncle, Abraham Kassel, and his young daughter, and he, too, decided to apply for a Russian passport. With his horse and wagon he moved his family, as required by his passport, one hundred miles away from Bialystok. The Russians used this refugee manpower to build and populate their faraway new cities and towns.

For those few months between 1939 and 1940, settled in our routines in Bialystok, life began to normalize for us refugees. But, soon, in secret negotiations with the Russian administration, the natives of Bialystok and other border cities conceived a plan to account for all refugees with no permanent residential addresses, register them, give them mandatory work contracts in deep Russia, and force these refugees to work at hard labor in unknown distant parts of the country doing the kinds of jobs no Russians wanted to do.

I was working in Bialystok in 1940 when all this occurred and I witnessed the hatred from the natives, Jewish and gentile alike, and the Jews happened to have the influence to manipulate the new Russian administration. They convinced the Russians to forcefully deport the refugees. They used a ruse where refugees were instructed to register for whatever destination they ultimately desired, be it Israel, the U.S. or Russia. Naturally, the majority registered their intention to someday leave Russia and live in another country. This information would be used against us later on.

On the Move Again

One night, in the middle of the night, shortly after I had reunited with my parents and family who managed to cross the border, we were surrounded by soldiers and local agents. Those refugees who had registered that they did not wish to remain in Russia permanently were given fifteen minutes to gather some personal articles and leave. We were forced to make our way to the railroad station where we were squeezed into cattle trains that were waiting to ship us off, although we were not told where. We would learn later that our destination was northern Russia to work in forced labor camps.

After the fact, we found out that those who had registered themselves as willing to stay in Russia after the war had been forced to populate territories away from other Russian cities and deeper in rural Russia. They were allowed to become Russian citizens, with a paragraph included in their passports that they had once been refugees. Most were moved to areas one hundred miles away from the city.

Later, though, in 1941, those who were “safe” in the cities were the first ones to feel the full brunt of the German attack into Russia. They were the first line of people to be slaughtered. There is an old biblical saying: “If you plan the destruction of others, you yourself will be destroyed.” This was the fate of the city dwellers who shunned the refugees. We, by some quirk of fate, would be cold and hungry in far-away Russia, but safe. Those who planned our destruction were themselves destroyed. They were plowed down by German commandos and executed in massacres, not even shipped to concentration camps, since this was not the practice for Jewish prisoners during Germany’s invasion of Russia.

After three weeks on trains, our transport was unloaded. I found myself, now reunited with my family, in a town in northern Russia called Kotlas. Approximately three thousand of us waited on the banks of a river to be reloaded onto barges because the railroad went no farther. It has been estimated that during this massive relocation operation five hundred thousand to as many as one million people were transferred in one night from all the refugee cities. The plan was to have them populate work camps in distant northern Russia.

The three thousand refugees were unloaded at Kotlas, a town located at the joining of the Severnaya Dvina and Sukhona Rivers in northern Russia, where the railroad line ended, close to the White Sea and the Ural Mountains. From here, we were to be separated into three barges. Our wait for steamers which would pull these barges was seventy-two hours, three long days and nights. As we waited on the river bank, the younger people in the crowd acquainted themselves each other, striking up conversations by asking from where each had come. During the three days of waiting we milled around the crowds, meeting people, telling our stories, searching for friends.

I walked over to a group of girls and boys who looked my age and I asked one of the girls where she came from. She answered, "Mlawa." I said, "Mlawa? That's not far from where I grew up, only about 50 kilometers away." We talked for awhile, we walked a bit, and the mosquitoes ate us up alive, particularly at night near the river. It was impossible to sleep, so we just walked to keep the mosquitoes off of us. That is how I met Gittel Blankitner and her older brother Gedalia. She told me her sad story of the separation from her family and the decision by her parents to remain with their younger children while the two eldest were given money and instructions to escape in whatever manner possible.

When we learned we would be divided into three groups of one thousand, I asked Gittel if she wanted to stay with my group, and she said she would be glad to, particularly because I was the only person she had met from near her home town.

When we were finally loaded into the barges, there arose a great commotion, with screams and wailing. A young man who had become separated from his family during the mass transfer could not bear to be apart from them and jumped from the roof of the barge, dying instantly. Others attempted the same, but they were held back. The river was powerful and no one attempted to rescue the man in the river. Suicide for some was a viable option after the horrors we had already experienced and with the prospect of more in the coming days. In the cattle trains during the previous three weeks, the doors were only opened once a day. We had no sanitary facilities, so we dug holes in the floors for toilets and covered these with blankets. The smells were sickening, the illness constant, the endless crying nerve-wracking. One day when the doors opened we discovered buckets of soup and rations of bread for distribution. But it was barely enough for survival.

Eventually the hysteria at the river subsided and we began our journey along the river for another week.

The barges were foul-smelling and filthy because they had just been used to transport cattle and other livestock. I could not bear to remain inside, so I suggested to Gittel and her friends that we find a place outside to make ourselves more comfortable for sleeping. She agreed. We established a spot for ourselves on the roof, although we still could not sleep, so we talked throughout the night. I was struck by a closeness I felt for Gittel, a kinship in my heart

towards her. But I was powerless to help her in her sorrow for her separation from her family and the hardships she had thus far endured. She worried that her parents were suffering back in Poland. She worried that she would never see her family again.

Conditions on the barge were nearly as horrible as on the train. Meager portions of tasteless and disgusting food were distributed only once per day. Sanitary facilities were non-existent. But people with hope made the best of the situation.

After a few days of travel along the river, we watched as the Russians disconnected one of the barges from the other two and abandoned it and its passengers at a desolate location along the banks of the river. That's where the first thousand people were dropped. Within a few hours, another barge was unhooked. Eventually the third barge was released. Once on land, these groups were divided into smaller groups which were disbursed to unknown destinations in the deep woods.

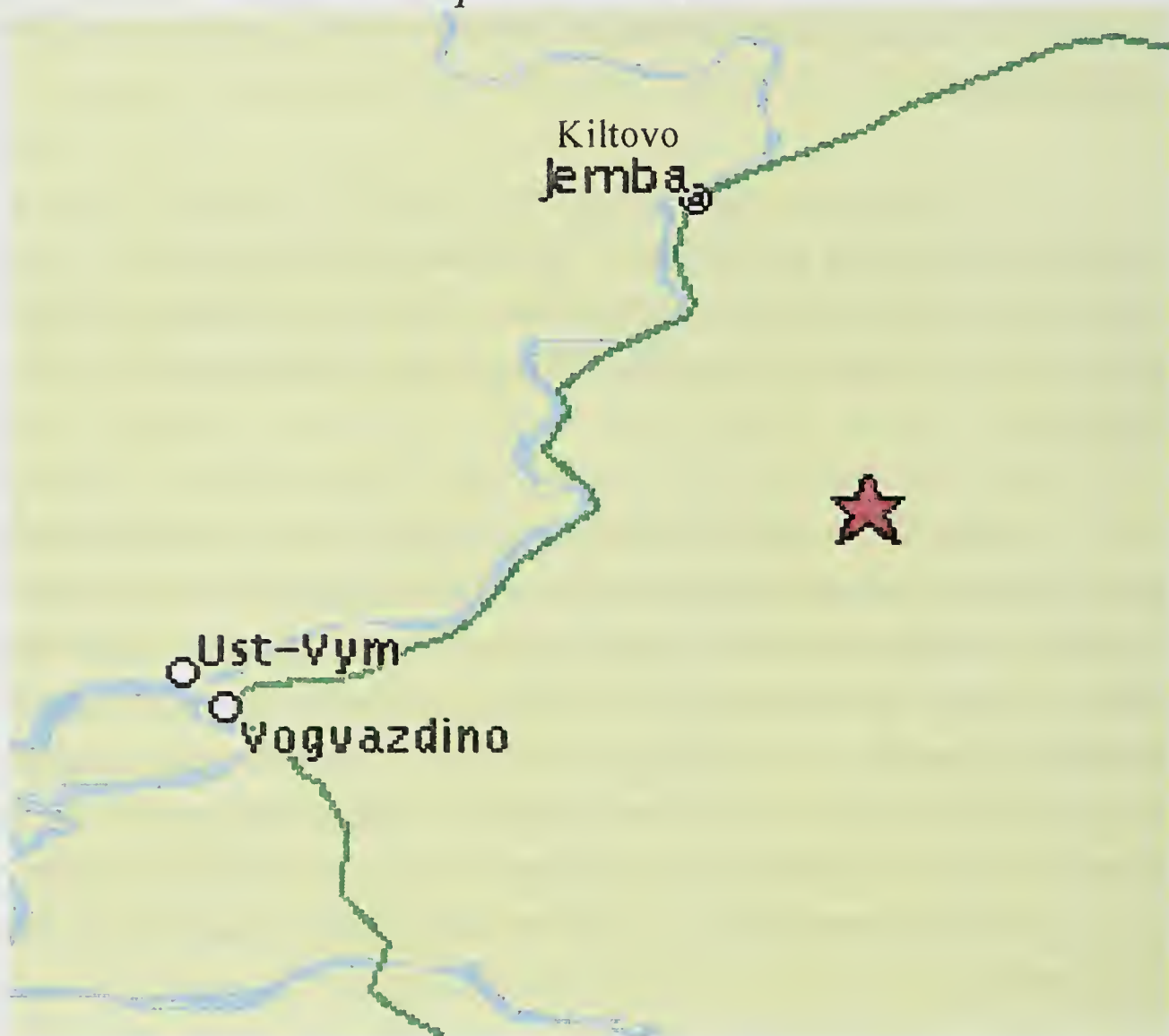
Home Sweet Kiltovo

Our barge was the last to be unloaded and we, too, were separated into groups of three hundred. Since I was now fairly well acquainted with Gittel and her brother Gedalia, I suggested we all stay in the same group. They agreed. Our group was then transported in Russian trucks to a place where a couple dozen log barracks were awaiting us and others were being built - our new homes. We were told this place was called Kiltovo.

Some inhabitants of this village, we would later learn, had been there since 1927 for some crime of which they were accused that year, and others arrived in 1935 when

they refused to comply with the collectivization of farms.

The labor camp Kiltovo in northern Russia



These were Russian and Ukrainian families sent to forced labor in Kiltovo. It was they who had built our barracks, home now for about three hundred fifty Jews from various parts of Poland.

The following day we were assigned various duties. Gittel, young and strong and eighteen years old, was dispatched to a lumberjacking operation. I, nearly eighteen years old myself, was sent to the brickmaking crew. I kept busy arranging our family quarters for myself and my family. From then on Gittel and I only met occasionally and accidentally, and talked a bit when we did meet. She had received information from others she had spoken with of the

horrors occurring in Poland at the hands of the Germans. Frankly, we were not much better off. The Russians fed us very little food, a piece of bread and some watered-down soup twice a day, and this was our only nourishment for the long hours of hard labor we had to endure each day.

Gittel's brother, although only twenty-three years old, soon weakened and fell ill. In a short time he died because there were no medicines available to treat him. Gittel explained that he never was very strong or accustomed to hard work, having lived a pampered life in Poland. He considered himself an aristocrat and did not make friends easily. He did not approve of most of the people that he met or who befriended Gittel, but Gittel later told me that I was the one person he said he trusted with his sister.

Gittel was suddenly orphaned and I felt great pain for this young girl now all alone in a world turned upside down. Lost children, lost parents, lost siblings, and no idea of what the next day would bring. The brave made the best of their lot. The weak became ill and disillusioned and died out.

I immersed myself in my work and tried to do the best job I could. Gittel, on her own now, was sent to another site, the Fifty-third Uchastok, a yet unnamed territory still only a number on the Russian maps. My sister was also sent to work there, preparing roads for the lumberjack operation and performing various logging functions. Winter arrived, a harsh one with terrible snows and cold. People suffered and starved, but the young and the strong survived. It was 1941 and we all hoped and prayed that in the next year something good would happen.

The barracks were primitive log structures with a stove in the center. My family and another fifty people were assigned to one of these barracks. We slept on iron beds with

straw mattresses. Our furnishings consisted of one or two make-shift tables and benches. Cold, crowded, damp, unsanitary, unhealthy, malnourished, overworked - that was our lot in Russian life.

From the first day, every individual over sixteen years of age was required to register for a work assignment. No work meant no food. Children younger than sixteen were required to attend school in one of the barracks. In actuality, we were in a concentration camp without the barbed wire. Barbed wire was unnecessary because there was no escape from there since we were surrounded by hundreds of miles of wilderness. There were no roads, no hope for transport out. We learned well that no one could escape from this God-forsaken place.

The Russians allotted each person one pound of bread per day. In the morning before departing for work detail we gathered in a cafeteria-style kitchen to receive our daily bowl of watery soup.

My job at first was to man the brick-making facility which would provide the materials for chimneys and fireplaces in the community. Gittel and her brother had been assigned to cut trees in the woods one or two miles away. In fact, most were assigned to logging operations. Doctors, lawyers, businessmen, scholars, writers and others comprised this group, but all had to perform menial labor as ordered. The authority in that community consisted of a commandant and three deputies.

Russians who were exiled there earlier, who were already inhabiting this village when we arrived, recounted to us how they arrived in Kiltovo, a place in the middle of the woods, and were forced to build their own shelters and community from the resources around them. Some had been

there as long as seven years. They told us of the rebellious ones who refused to do the work and subsequently received no food and died of starvation. They came from regions like Byelorussia and the Ukraine. I made friends with some of these families.

One older man whose name was Otreshka and who was at least seventy years old, was the manager of the brick-works and as we baked the bricks in the oven late at night (the bricks were baked three days) he told me stories of the townspeople. We became very good friends.

When fall arrived, a doctor from Warsaw proposed that a clinic be built from one of the barracks. He had been a famous surgeon in Warsaw by the name of Spillman. He received permission to organize the clinic.

While in Kiltovo we received no communication or news whatsoever from the outside world.

From the start people began to show the effects of their reduced food rations. They became increasingly emaciated and ill under the harsh conditions of Kiltovo. Spiritually and physically they began to starve, and people died - many in a first wave of starvation after arrival, and a second wave when the early winter conditions wreaked havoc on the physically exhausted, underfed, ill-equipped and poorly clothed inhabitants of the village.

My father took ill in the fall and there was no medicine to cure him. The doctor apologized - without medicine he was powerless. He urged us to survive with inner strength. In the beginning of 1941 my father passed away in his bed. I watched him die. No one could do anything for him. He succumbed. My mother and sisters survived. I was the youngest of all of them, only eighteen years old. One sister was nine-

teen, the other twenty-one.

The makeshift clinic could not help my father and many others who became ill. In fact, just two weeks after my father's death, Gittel's brother also passed away.

After my father died, I lost some hope and the winter took its toll on all of us, particularly the elderly. In spite of the lack of food, heat and sleep, the most dangerous disease we had was that hope ebbed out of all of us - the worst deprivation of all.

The brick-making operation continued for a while during that winter, but was eventually closed. The building itself was dismantled in order to provide the brick-makers with some earth which had not yet frozen - the ground beneath it. When the last of that ground froze, brick-making stopped. People who had been working the bricks were reassigned, including myself. Near the start of winter I began cutting trees with the rest of that brigade. We cleared the woods which lay two or three miles from the Kiltovo camp. Some people were sent ten or more miles away to other areas of the woods, to numbered areas called Uchastovs, meaning "sections", where they spent the week at work, and, if they could make it back to Kiltovo, they walked back to their barracks on the weekend.

My two sisters were sent away to a section of woods fifteen miles away. My mother and I were left behind. The commandant, in a gesture of sympathy for the death of my father, informed me that my family would be sent to a better barracks where the rooms were partitioned, one which was occupied by another family from Warsaw. The wife was an expectant mother who worked in the clinic as a nurse. We would share the nine by twelve foot dwelling and my mother would look after the expectant mother. Her husband had

been sent away on a tree-cutting expedition and only returned every two or three weeks. When he did return, he had no strength. As the time passed, this nurse and the doctor running the clinic grew closer. He was married with three children and lived in more comfortable quarters connected to the clinic. I believe the two developed a romantic relationship while her husband was away.

The nurse gave birth to a son. Her husband eventually did not return to Kiltovo. One day, the surgeon's wife stormed into our barracks and accused the nurse of having an affair with her husband. The nurse denied this. It was the talk of the village.

With the frequent separations of husbands and wives due to work details away from the camp, many romances sprung up between the most desirable women and Russians. Some became pregnant, but received favors from their Russian suitors who were fairly well off, compared to the fresh group of refugees who had nothing. Some even married and bettered themselves in this way. My sisters and Gittel did not involve themselves with Russians, particularly because they were all mourning the deaths of loved ones.

In the following year, 1941, we heard a rumor that Germany had attacked Russia. We also heard, through letters that had arrived at our camp, that Russia had allied with England and the United States to battle the Germans. This news gave us hope in our most desperate hours under the pressures of hard labor and starvation, and we believed that someday we would be set free from this hell if we used all the inner strength we could muster to survive.

Better in Syktyvkar?

After fourteen months in that hell-hole called Kiltovo we were offered the option of staying or moving on to a better location in Russia or elsewhere. Evidently, when the Russians joined the Allied forces to defeat Germany, better treatment of prisoners and refugees was a requirement of the Allies. Given the choice to stay or to leave, only those who were well established in the village chose to remain in Kiltovo.

The offer was not as good as it sounded. If we wished to leave, we had to produce our own transportation out. To discourage us from leaving, the commandant called a meeting announcing that, if we agreed to join the Allied forces to fight the Germans, we would receive release papers from the camp officials which would allow us to relocate. He reminded us, however, that there was a war in progress and we were better off staying in Kiltovo. Although he could not hold us, his warnings were strong ones and, in addition, he would not provide us with transportation.

Being young and hopeful, I decided with my family that my older sister and I would venture out on foot and try to hitch rides with passers-by, but my mother and younger sister would remain behind until such time that I would return to bring them to our new settlement.

We lived within strict limits and curfews in Kiltovo, but once I accidentally ventured out beyond the camp limits and noticed that about two miles away there seemed to be a larger village or town in the distance. I later inquired about it and learned that this town was one of many concentrations of five thousand or more prisoners who were under constant guard. The confines of the town were marked by prison watchtowers. These were political prisoners under the Russian regime who were sentenced to closed concentration camps. The reason ours was an open camp was that under the

Russian constitution it was prohibited to imprison entire families.

My sister and I hitch-hiked, bound for anywhere far from hateful Kiltovo. On a given day, a truck, a tractor and a horse and cart might pass. We begged each passer-by to take us along. Some were forewarned not to help us reach our destination. With our clothing and some possessions we had accumulated we were able to bargain with some drivers into giving us a lift. A tractor carried us to the nearest tugboat landing. With our few belongings in hand, we asked for directions and advice about the nearest decent town.

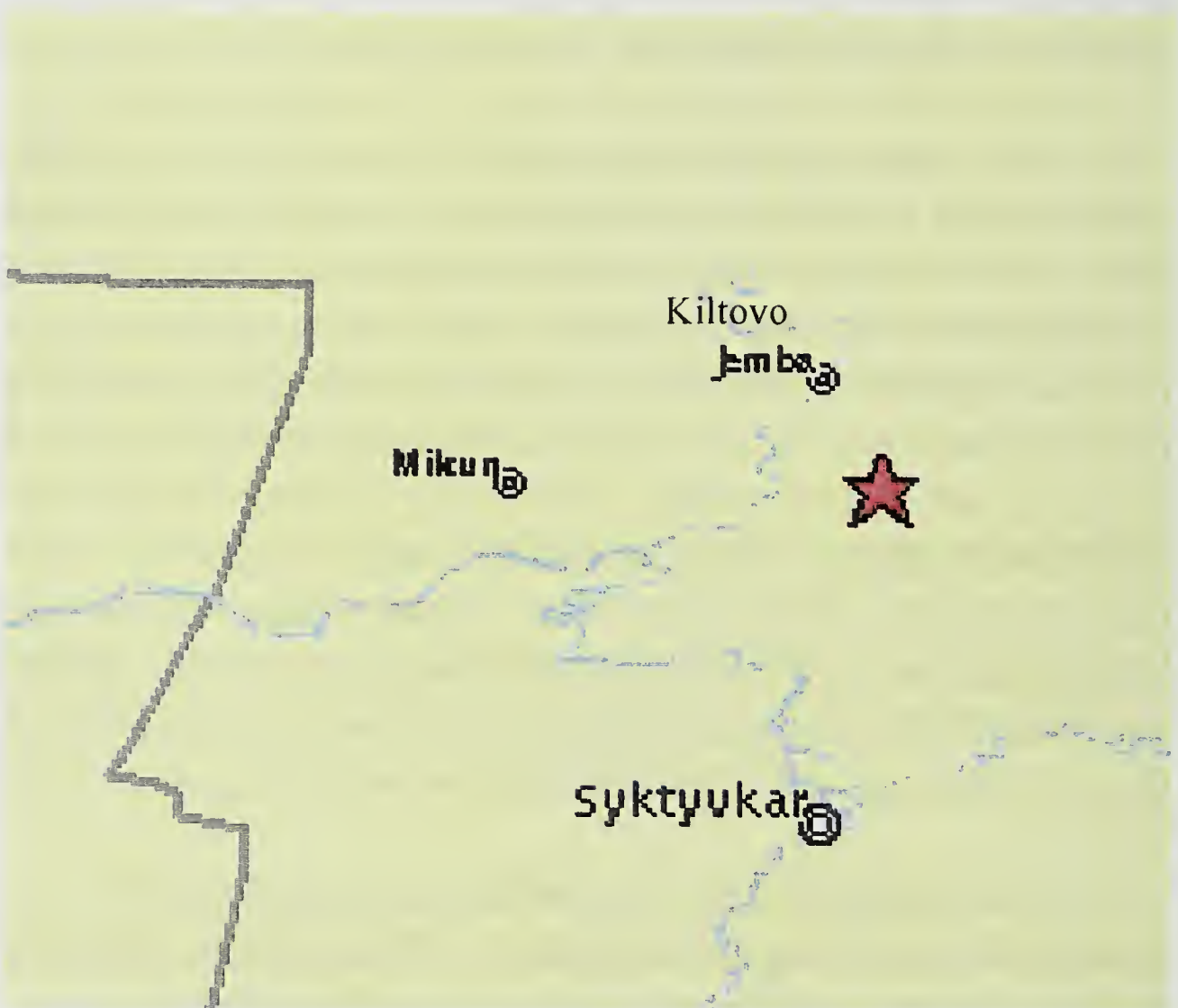
We were advised to travel by boat to a town fifty miles away, but the boat would arrive in the port in three days and we had no ticket. Hundreds were crowded in the waiting room for three days and nights hoping to find a spot on that tugboat. My sister and I purchased tickets and, fifty miles downriver, reached the city of Syktyvkar. We searched for jobs, but unsuccessfully. Eventually I learned that a construction company was looking for manual laborers for some of its projects. Workers of the company received meager lodging and some food as part of their compensation. These were similar to migrant shacks, but at least we would have a place to stay and a food ration card as well.

We applied for work with that company and I explained to the hiring manager that with my other sister and mother there would be three able-bodied workers and one who could not work. He agreed to authorize passes and food ration cards for us for one week so that we could retrieve the rest of my family. Our new home would be Syktyvkar, a city with a population of thirty to forty thousand inhabitants.

As insurance that I would return, the manager insisted that my sister remain in our living quarters and begin

work while I traveled. We had the luxury of an outhouse with our new company-provided lodgings. The company was government-owned and, we later learned, also had authority over a prison camp from which it obtained many of its laborers. Many companies across Russia gathered their work crews from a pool of free men and prisoners.

I returned to Kiltovo and packed up the remainder of my family and our belongings and made the difficult return trip to Syktyvkar with them.



Unlike the prison inmates used in the building projects, after a day of labor we were free to go as we pleased, although we had little strength to do more than sleep following a day's work.

We did hear more news about the outside world de-

velopments, but it was discouraging. We heard that the Russians were falling to the German advances on all fronts, including the Finnish border and approaching Leningrad. We learned of the Germans' progress in their march towards Moscow. Reports about atrocities against Jews inflicted by the German army were frightful. Each day brought more news of murders, destruction, Russian fatalities, and cruelties directed to the inhabitants of ghettos and cities such as Kiev, Kharkov, Lvov, Bialystok, and Byelorussia.

The food situation worsened. Russian provisions diminished. Refugees who had escaped from near Leningrad were evacuated to Syktyvkar. Many evacuees headed for northern Russia. In Syktyvkar endless food lines formed for a small bowl of soup. The image of those faces who suffered the ordeals of war are indelibly etched in my memory. The immediate concerns of all revolved around survival - finding food, lodging and work.

We heard that anyone interested in volunteering could enlist in the Russian army to help repel the German invasion. Those Polish citizens who were recently released from labor camps were also informed that they could register in a separate brigade of soldiers managed by a Polish general, called the Anders brigade. Many did attempt to register for General Anders' special brigade, but these Poles were well-known anti-semites and they refused to enroll Jews in their ranks. They maintained strong connections with the exiled Polish government in London and worked with English and American diplomats, but they were still staunchly anti-Jew and would not fight side-by-side with Jews in their brigade. Some Polish Jews who wished to join used false Polish names and documents.

Anders' brigade had the privilege of being transported to central Russia, tens of thousands of soldiers shipped to

Odessa and the Black Sea region to open up a second southern front. These tens of thousands of soldiers never did take part in battle. They merely escaped Russia safely via a southern route, abandoning the Russians in their plight against the invading German forces. I recall that at one point Stalin, in a speech to the Russian soldiers and with despair in his voice, pleaded with the military forces to ease the pressure and open up that second front. Anders' brigade was long gone - the second front never materialized. As a result, the Russian people took a heavy beating in 1942.

1942 was a year of deprivation for all in Russia. The shortage of food was so acute that people were killing dogs for food. Leningrad was under siege and it was rumored that the Germans were only miles away from Moscow. The Russian people resisted valiantly. Stories reached us of people with molotov cocktails tied to their bodies throwing themselves in front of German tanks to impede their progress.

Miraculously, the German army was eventually repelled. By the beginning of 1943 the German army's defeat was a possibility. Supplies began to arrive from the north - trucks, ammunition, military hardware and supplies from the United States. One Polish woman, not in the military, Wanda Wazileska, approached the government of Russia and announced that she planned to organize the Wanda Wazileska army which would fight side-by-side with the Russian forces. It would be composed of all willing Polish refugees, without exception.

This troop, in Polish uniform, was organized in the war effort. In addition, specialists from among this force of refugees contributed to other needs of the war. They kept their pledge to fight side-by-side with the Russians until victory.

We all tried to do our part to bring a victorious end to the war. I worked with a detail of horses used for delivery of materials and for other special assignments.

I befriended a Russian woman who managed a child-care facility for the small children of the town. One day she was inquiring at the construction company's stables about the availability of a horse to bring wood to keep the children's center warm for the children. She was politely informed that all horses were required for construction projects and the managers suggested that she and some women organize a crew with sleds each weekend to drag up some wood for her kindergarten. She replied that everyone works very hard all week and they need their one day of rest and time to do home chores and care for their children. The manager sent her away.

When I overheard this, I approached her and volunteered to bring wood for her after work hours. She agreed and together late at night we loaded wood this way. In return, she fed me a good meal and she sent me home with food for my mother and sisters. Although I did not want to accept her generosity, she insisted. I did this frequently throughout the winter months. We became friends.

One day, she handed me some money and told me to buy some tickets to the theater in the city - a live performance on stage which was supported by the government. The play was Romeo and Juliet, and she insisted I join her and some of her friends at the performance.

The war began to turn around with the defeat of the Germans near Stalingrad and close to Moscow.

During the summer of 1942, shortages were widespread. There was barely enough grain to feed the horses, so

each day one or two men were delegated to take the horses to woods or fields to nourish them. A fellow worker and I received orders to lead twenty-nine horses out of the city and beyond the outskirts to an area of trees and grass that could serve as a pasture. The horses grazed throughout the night. Unfortunately, at daybreak we had to return the horses to the worksite so they could complete their daily duties. To keep them from running away, we hobbled the front legs of each horse by tying them with rope. We were on foot and horseback ourselves. We had this assignment throughout the summer.

By day I had some free time because of my night shift, so I organized and led some excursions into the woods to forage for mushrooms, berries and other edibles because food was so scarce. I acquired a compass and familiarized myself with the terrain and the region. We were usually a group of ten or twelve young people. As often as three times a week we ventured into the woods and returned with enough to eat and even some extra to sell at the marketplace. I wove myself a basket which I wore on my back to carry a large load out of the woods. People in town offered me money, but I preferred to exchange my foods for other goods.

One rainy night, while I was riding an unshod young horse and rounding up the remaining horses, my horse slipped from under me near a ravine. We overturned several times and I was badly hurt from the weight of the horse rolling over me. My companion was far away and sleeping and could not hear my screams. Luckily the horse was not hurt and merely stood and watched me from a few yards away. He seemed almost sympathetic to my pain. I whistled for him and he came right over. He stood over me as I lay on the ground, badly injured. I reached for the ring on his saddle and with all my strength pulled my aching body up onto the horse. We slowly made our way to the campsite. My partner

saw that I was badly hurt and I told him what had happened. He advised me to head down the road as gently as possible and find the clinic, and he gathered the horses. I arrived before the clinic's opening and waited lamely at the entrance. The doctor called me a lucky son of a gun when he informed me that no bones were broken, and he bandaged me up and sent me home.

The year before, while in Kiltovo during a logging operation with horses and chains, the logs tangled, some chains malfunctioned and my legs and foot were run over by runaway logs on the river bank. People nearby sent me on horseback to be examined by the doctor, suspecting I had broken my foot. That time, also, by the grace of God who gave me a strong body, my bones did not break. The recovery was extremely slow and painful, and I was ordered to return to work well before recovery was complete, but I did eventually fully recover.

When I recall these accidents and the shrapnel injury I received in Warsaw, and when I think about my crossing of the Polish border in broad daylight with no confrontations, I feel as though a guardian angel was constantly watching over me and protecting me from doom. It was the hand of fate. There must have been a destiny for me yet to fulfill.

One day I was transporting materials to another construction site - a huge tannery and shoe factory that was being built to produce shoes for the Russian servicemen. I had knowledge of leather tanning from personal experience with my family's businesses and some apprenticeship training I received while in Bialystok. I approached one of the managers and mentioned that I was knowledgeable in tannery processes and would be interested in helping when the facility was complete. He took my name and agreed to contact me when the factory opened. He was an engineer from Moscow

who was overseeing the project.

Some months later I received a message that I was invited to an interview. For one hour of cross examination I had to prove my tannery expertise. They informed me that I would be offered a job within the week.

When more than a week passed with no word from the tannery, I returned to their offices and was told that when they spoke with the construction company where I worked, my director would not release me. He demanded two employees in exchange for me to replace me in my construction job. The following day I confronted my supervisor and reminded him that both companies were government-owned. I challenged him with the question, "Are your employees free workers or slaves to their companies and is this permitted under the Russian constitution?" I demanded to see the director of the company and presented my case to him, once again comparing my situation with that of a slave. He ordered his secretary to remove me from his office.

The following day I received word that I had been transferred to the most dangerous assignment in the entire company - extracting logs which were frozen and trapped during transport along the two rivers that passed through Syktyvkar, the Sisela and Vidjigda Rivers.

Our crew of ten men, armed with daggers, spent the day chopping the ice around the logs and pulling them to the river's edge. The cold was unbearable and the work was grueling. I heard that even the strongest men never lasted more than one month before dying. I had worked there two weeks when I received notification that I was being inducted into the Russian army. Faced with a choice between serving in the army or being worked to death, I chose to serve.

About one thousand young men like myself were quickly assembled, assigned to battalions and hastily trained for three days. I had my identity card stamped by my employer that I was released to serve in the Russian army. We were ready to go to war, organized into troop units, sleeping with our packs and munitions, when we heard rumors that the Allies had intervened and put political pressure on the Russians to halt our induction which they deemed to be illegal. They claimed that we were not Russian citizens but Polish patriots recently released as refugees from forced labor camps.

We were all released. Many were glad to return to their former workplaces, but I, with my release stamp in hand, had no intention of returning to my death assignment on the frozen river. I planned to inform my employers that I was free to take any job, with no exchanges of other workers to replace me.

I was abruptly awakened before dawn the following morning and supervisors of the construction company insisted we all return to work immediately. I showed my stamped papers and told them I would be working on another government job. They threatened me with court trials and imprisonment, but I stood firm. I presented myself to the tanning company and they welcomed me and defended my rights. I was hired amid much controversy, in exchange for another worker, because they felt they needed my expertise. The leather factory consisted of a tannery on the first floor, shoe production on the second floor, and offices.

1943 had arrived and I was considered a valuable contributor in this enterprise. During this stint I met people from throughout Russia, and among them were families designated "traitor families" because the head of their household had acted treasonably while the Russian army was

fending off the German attack. Early in the war, full divisions of the Russian army, with generals and equipment, surrendered themselves to the Germans without a fight. One of these divisions, General Vlasov's Army, composed of soldiers predominantly from Byelorussia and the Ukraine, turned themselves in during the early weeks of battle, hoping to appease the Germans, and the Germans promised to free these regions in return. Later, when the Germans disarmed these soldiers, they ordered them to turn on their own countrymen. They provided despicable services to the Nazis and collaborated with the Germans for a while. When they eventually realized that the Germans were not fulfilling their promises to free their regions, they were disappointed and disillusioned and attempted to flee from the German control and form their own underground fighting units, defending their lives while escaping the German wrath. They were branded "traitors" by the Russians nonetheless, and the government decided to punish the surviving families by exiling them into deep Russia. These families paid for the sins of their sons and brothers with treatment and hardships similar to our experience in Kiltovo.

By 1943, we seasoned refugees were accustomed to the winter climate of the north, but these poor souls were not, and they suffered many casualties due to starvation, illness, weakness, and deprivation. I pitied them and allowed them after hours when the plant had closed for the day to scrounge any meat left over on the animal hides. I was eventually discovered and reprimanded for helping these people, but I defended my position that if they were not allowed to take what we offered, they were likely to steal the hides later in the production process, attempt to eat these pieces, and perhaps poison themselves. The director of the plant just dismissed me with a mild reprimand and a request that he never know we were aiding these "criminals".

Late fall 1943, tens of thousands of people like me had settled in an area once inhabited mainly by eskimo-type people. This city was the capital of the region, which stretches all the way to the White Sea, up to the Urals and Leningrad. Charitable organizations began to donate provisions for us, including blankets and clothing, medicines and food. Greedy individuals showed their true colors when they sold many of these donated articles on the black market, rather than distribute them among the needy. To remedy this problem, distribution centers were organized. Personally, I considered myself fortunate and only asked for a blanket or two. The distribution centers as first organized were rife with corruption. Eventually, the Russians took over the distribution of these goods to ensure that the needy would receive what was rightfully theirs.

As 1943 drew to a close, we all grew more and more optimistic. I had rigged up a short wave radio in the single room I now slept in apart from the rest of my family. A small oven heated my room. I listened to the radio broadcast every day from one radio station via a cable connected to the factory where I worked.

One of the shortages in the country was soap, and one day we were involved in a factory planning meeting to discuss how we could use the by-products of the tanning business to produce soap. We undertook a project to produce five hundred kilos of soap each month. I organized this soap production project, and within a month we were fabricating a liquid soap product as specified. The following month we doubled the five hundred kilos. I had noticed that a nearby sawmill was creating a tremendous amount of sawdust which also left a thick residue. I wondered if these materials could enhance our soap production. We experimented with this concept and increased our soap output with these additives.

As a reward for our creativity, the tannery awarded me and a colleague of mine a citation and a liter each of vodka. My partner's name was Moses Frisch, a tannery specialist from Lodz, Poland who escaped Poland after the war began, but left behind a wife and children. His experiences after escaping Poland were similar to mine, but he was much older than I - forty years old at the time. He served as a supervisor in the tannery. I was a manager of raw materials and production.

Another woman, Marsha, a mother of four children and whose husband was away in the service, also worked at the factory. She was eventually notified that her husband was killed in battle. She worked under Moses Frisch's supervision. When we were awarded the two liters of vodka, Moses asked us what we planned to do with all that vodka. We could have sold it and earned a sizable profit in rubles, or we could invite our friends and celebrate. He and Marsha voted for the party, and I went along with the majority rule.

Marsha supplied the food and other party necessities and hosted the celebration in her village apartment in Kuchbahn, about a two mile walk from the plant. Marsha and Moses seemed to be developing a close relationship, and I heard that they were cohabitating. They explained that she had taken him in as a boarder, but it was obvious that he was more than a boarder in her home. They each filled the emptiness and satisfied each other's needs.

Guests at the party included Marsha's mother and sisters, my sister, another engineer from the tannery, and Marsha's four children watched the party from their loft. One of Marsha's sisters, Vyera, a medical student in Syktyvkar, was quite friendly with me at the party. The youngest of the sisters was still a student. Amid all the misery of the months

of war, we enjoyed that evening. By two o'clock in the morning the party was breaking up, but Marsha and her sisters suggested we all stay through the night. They made a place for me to sleep, and I slept beside Marsha's sister on the floor. This was in November of 1943.

After that celebration, Vyera and I became good friends and I frequently visited her at the hospital and her apartment. Her hospital shifts usually lasted thirty-six hours at a time, but when she was off duty she invited me to be with her and gave me an open invitation to stay in her place whenever I wished. We grew to be more than good friends.

Once she remarked that I did not have enough potatoes. Potatoes were a valuable and expensive commodity at that time, where a bucket of potatoes could cost an entire month's wages, if you could find some. She insisted on bringing me some, cooked me some hot meals for my arrival home, and even spruced up my room with curtains and other niceties. I enjoyed her and we became very close.

Vyera tried to help during those bad times, especially with food shortages during this time of rationing. Whenever she had days off from the hospital she stopped by to see me in my little room. We had some nice meals. I had some cooked pork fat which we used for frying, and she and I liked that. She also gave me a key to her apartment in Syktyvkar. Her room just had an oven, but not a stove top. I had a hot plate which was fine for frying and cooking. She stopped by a couple of times and tried to be more and more friendly, inviting me often to her place. I took her up on the offers whenever I had some free time.

One day Vyera told me that her sister Marsha who was friendly with my coworker Moshe Frisch who lived with her, had just had an abortion. Vyera needed to pick up her

sister and help her with her recovery from the abortion. I gave her a piece of pork to give to Marsha, to help her regain her strength. They appreciated it.

By December, it was already very cold and the ground completely frozen. I noticed that Vyera's apartment was freezing, and she mentioned that she was short on wood to keep the heater going. I managed, through my work, to get a horse and sled, and I chopped up some wood that could be burned in her stove and loaded it into the sled. I surprised her with the load of wood under her window. She was grateful.

I also brought her as a gift a pair of long fur-covered tall boots which were great in dry snow weather, but not wet weather.

We went to movies when we could, but I was usually too busy.

We did plan a New Year's celebration of taking in a movie in the city when we would both have a day off. She proposed we stay in and that I bring some pieces of pork and we try to cook it up with onions to make it tastier. Cooked this way, the leftover lard could also be used to spread on bread or fry up other foods. So, when I arrived on New Year's eve, I brought a whole tray full of this pork. With only her oven, she put the meat in a pot to cook inside. But the fire was too strong on one side, and the meat should have been cooked slowly. Suddenly we smelled something burning, and, sure enough, our entire feast was burned up and inedible. We had to throw it out.

We regretted the cooking disaster, but still celebrated New Year's. The room was pretty warm, thanks to the wood I had brought earlier. The next door neighbor, an evacuee from Leningrad who had two children, and whose husband

was fighting in the war, celebrated with us. It was very enjoyable singing songs, talking, ringing in the new year.

I stayed the night and Vyera was very friendly to me and we became very close. The next day, we took a walk in the snow in the city, and then tried to get into a movie, but it was all sold out. So, we walked around some more, and then, later, became very close again, and she loved it. I didn't mind it one bit, myself. She was very gentle and friendly, and this was a time when everyone needed some encouragement of hope for the future. It was January 1, 1944.

We spent all day and late into the night together. We both realized that the following day both of us had to return to work. It was about three miles to my house and I would have to walk home. Somehow we lost track of time, and it was close to midnight when I left to begin the three-mile trek home.

I walked through the center and then into the outskirts of the city towards the sawmill. There was a small pedestrian bridge that traversed a ravine. It was only about three feet wide and the ravine below was frozen and filled with ice and snow. I was nearly home, which was a place called Kuchbahn, just past the sawmill. Suddenly I noticed that coming towards me were three men who would also be crossing the bridge at the same time I would. I had on a pair of high boots and inside my boots I kept the key to my workplace, a heavy, foot-long skeleton key made of iron. It opened the door of the warehouse I worked in.

We reached the bridge at about the same time, and then were almost face to face with each other. The bridge was so narrow that really only one person could pass at a time. It was necessary to walk single file. The front person, with his two companions walking behind him, was facing me

when the man behind him pushed him into me, as if to start a fight. I said that if there wasn't enough room to pass that I would let them by. They started a fight instead.

I grabbed the iron key from my boot and defended myself against the three hoodlums. I had never seen them before and I don't think they knew who I was. I suddenly recalled that people had been attacked at night, especially in robberies for ration cards and money, right in that area. Women had also been attacked around there late at night. So, I knew I was in trouble.

I fought off the first man, and knocked him down into the ice and snow in the ravine. The second guy lunged at me, and I tried to defend myself, but he pulled out a knife. He tried to stab me, but I used my big key as a weapon to protect myself against him. In the heat of the moment I didn't even notice that he managed to cut me near my left eyebrow, leaving a wound about an inch deep. The third man ran away, probably because he was unarmed. The first person was lying still in the snow below. I don't believe he was badly hurt because the fall was not a hard one.

I started to run the last one hundred fifty meters to my building when I wiped something dripping from my head down my face. I saw the blood on my hand. I put snow in my handkerchief and held it to my eyebrow to stop the bleeding.

When I entered my home, my sister Pearl who was staying with me awoke from her sleep and asked what happened. I explained that I had been attacked by three hoodlums. I washed my wound, but by then there was swelling all around the eye like a balloon, and in the mirror I saw a large gash in my brow.

In the morning the swelling was even worse. I used

cold water and snow and ice, but I decided to have it examined by the doctor in the clinic. He told me that I was very lucky because I was one-half inch away from losing my eye. The brow bone protected the eye. He cleaned and dressed my wound and I went home.

The next day I did go to work and everyone asked about my eye. I told them I had fallen near the pedestrian bridge and had cut myself. At the clinic, though, I did divulge the circumstances of my injury, and the next day an official from the NKVD police came to ask me some questions. He reminded me that that was a very dangerous area at night, and that a lot of hoodlums were just looking for trouble there. There had been a rape there and a murder of a woman who had been a supervisor in a store and was carrying the day's receipts. The officer warned me to be more careful, especially when walking alone. He also said that it was unlikely he would find the perpetrators, since I could not really see them very well in the dark and could only vaguely guess their age. They were probably in their late teens because, had they been older, they would have been in the military service. A couple weeks later when I checked on the investigation, I learned that they couldn't find the attackers and probably would not continue the search.

By then the swelling was gone and the wound was healing. I still have a scar from that wound. After that, I stopped going to see Vyera for a few months. She dropped by a couple of times and asked why I wasn't seeing her anymore. I made excuses that I was too busy. Besides, in February 1944 we heard some news that we must register because in the spring we would be allowed to return to central Russia. This made my life even busier because I had to train those who would replace me in my factory position after our release.

The months then flew. When spring arrived, I started to travel to the city more often.

Where was Gittel?

When I was settled in Syktyvkar, a city of about sixty thousand inhabitants, I ran into Gittel after having lost track of her for awhile since leaving Kiltovo. She told me that she had managed to survive on her own, and then to move on to that city with only the few belongings that remained from her brother and herself.

After her brother's death she had met from her home town a family with two children. She lived with them and worked in a brick factory in the city. The work was difficult, but she was glad to have a place to rest her head each day and some food to eat.

The man of the family with whom she stayed was an Orthodox Jew who offered to help her sell her few pieces of clothing and belongings to obtain money for food. He sold Gittel's things on the black market, but, rather than give her the proceeds, he kept the money. She accused him of stealing from her, and a heated argument followed. The man felt no remorse for having taken advantage of the unfortunate girl.

She immediately moved out and found a little place of her own with a group of other young people. She had little left then, but she had her job and tried to go on with life. The pain of war takes many forms, including the disillusionment of a young girl when she is robbed by someone she thought she could trust, an Orthodox Jew at that. What goes around eventually comes around, though, and justice did eventually prevail when, on an unrelated matter, that same man was arrested for selling on the black market and for other crimes, and he was sent to a Russian concentration camp where he eventually died.

While in Syktyvkar in 1942, I was occupied with my own problems, but occasionally I did run into Gittel and she updated me on her misfortunes and adventures. I was not much help to her, but I was a sympathetic friend. I encouraged her to carry on, I gave her words of hope. That was all that I could give at the time.

In 1943, when I began my position as supervisor at the tannery, after my controversial departure from my previous job, I tried to find a job for Gittel. I urged her to change jobs and move to that part of the city. I attempted to help her and visited her occasionally, bringing her little gifts of food. At that time the war was raging on and the Russian people suffered from the food shortages that were everywhere.

The war was not progressing very well for Russia at that time, but we maintained hope for a better tomorrow. I encouraged Gittel to hold on, to do her best, not give up. By mid-1943, the war turned for the better on the Russian front. The Russians repelled the German army near Stalingrad and in other places, and our hopes rose. I invited Gittel to see a movie one day. She agreed.

Syktyvkar was much like a city in Alaska, with its nine months of frigid cold and three months of summer. Summertime was a filthy time, with the unpaved roads rutted and muddy. We wore high boots to keep the slush and mud off our feet. Wooden planks were spread along the roadways for people to walk on. Wagons and trucks which passed made the muddy conditions even worse. The houses were single-, two- and three-story buildings, mostly of wood. One of the highlights of the town was a theater building where actors performed. There was also one movie house in the center of town, and this was the most popular spot in town, with movies running at all hours. Small factories producing various goods also dotted the city, but there were also sawmills,

one near the river of the city and another larger one three miles beyond the center. Most of the people were employed by the sawmills, including Gittel when she moved into a small barracks with her group of acquaintances. Normally, ten to fifteen families occupied a barracks.

I visited Gittel whenever I had the opportunity. One day I even brought her to my company to apply for a job working in the day care operation set up for mothers who worked at the tannery. This was a most desirable job because workers could count on having some food to eat. We saw each other occasionally, but I was also involved with Vyera at the time, my Russian medical student girlfriend. Gittel was aware of this friendship, but, whenever possible, she managed to run into me or cash in her ration card at the store near where I lived.

When we made the date to go to the movie, I was late arriving because I lived three miles from the city and had to make the trip on foot. She lived right in the city. When I finally did arrive, she had already decided I had stood her up and she was slightly miffed. I explained that I lived far from the center and I had misjudged the time to reach her place after work. We stood in line for tickets, an endless line. I finally bought our tickets and put my wallet in my back pocket. We found seats in the movie house and watched the film. When the movie ended, it was well after midnight. I walked Gittel to her home about a mile away and then I noticed that my wallet was missing. My wallet contained my money, a few hundred rubles, and my new ration card which provided me with my food and other supplies. My documents and other important papers were gone, too.

We rushed back to the movie house and they let us search around our seats, in case the wallet had dropped. It was not there. I eventually returned home, after reporting to

the authorities that I had lost my most valuable possessions in my wallet. They informed me that if they learned anything of the whereabouts of my wallet they would contact me. In the meantime, I had to finagle a new ration card, which included obtaining written affidavits from my employer and special permission from the Commissar to receive a replacement ration card. Without a ration card, I would never be able to obtain food. Fortunately, with everyone's help and support I did receive a new ration card and I was grateful and relieved.

A week later I received a message from the police that someone had turned in my wallet, with everything intact as I had described it, except my money and ration card. I rushed to pick it up, and I was told I was a very lucky man, since thieves ordinarily did not bother to save documents and photographs which were worthless to them. This was near the end of 1943.

For a while I did not see Gittel quite so often because I became more involved with my work responsibilities, and I was seeing Vyera more frequently, especially because she lived closer.

One day I ran into Gittel again on my side of town. She proudly announced that she had enrolled in a school during the winter, a technical school for motorized boats, and was continuing with that to become a diesel motor operator or mechanic. I wished her luck. She explained that it had been about two months of instruction, and it kept her busy and indoors, which was good. She planned to finish the course in the spring, and with the tidal waters coming in during April, by May she would have completed the program. After that, she would be a technician in tugboat engine maintenance. I teased her about becoming a mechanic, and she responded that taking classes was preferable to other hard

work, she was acquiring a skill, and she would then have to take a trip on a tugboat as a mechanic's helper upon completion of the course.

When I had the chance, I tried to pass by the places where Gittel lived. I learned that she had had a rough winter herself. She asked me what I had done all winter, and I told her a little bit, but not the part about my New Year's Day injury. I said that I didn't go into the city very much over the winter.

She stopped by to see me a couple of times during the spring when she cashed in her ration card, and there was a little store not far from my place where she filled her ration order, so it was convenient for her to say hello

Gittel contacted me near the end of her training and invited me to join her on the two-week tugboat trip upriver to assist with some logging operations. I chided her that she should be petrified, especially where she couldn't even swim. She and I laughed about her predicament, but she had to comply with her commitment.

Her first problem was reaching the other side of the river where she would have to embark on her trip. A makeshift ferry platform which was pulled by a tugboat brought people to the other shore. Gittel arrived a little late, so I suggested we rent a rowboat we noticed on the shore and make our way across that way. I rowed her across and we said our farewells. I made her promise to get in touch with me as soon as she returned. That was May 1944.

She contacted me right after her return and we saw each other a few more times, but our opportunities were limited since I rarely went into the city. Whenever I did go, I tried to stop by and leave her pieces of pork I had access to

at the tannery. She accepted these reluctantly because her religious beliefs forbade the consumption of pork.

In 1944 rumors began to fly that the war may soon be over. All those who had been brought by force to inner Russia were instructed to register to be transported back, this time in a more humane fashion, by the Russian government. I am not certain who arranged all this, but we heard that governments abroad signed agreements between them and had negotiated these terms because they were aware of all the hardships we refugees had suffered.

In the spring of 1944 we were given dates to register, and, subsequently, dates during which steamboats would transport us back to our station of origin in central Russia.

Farewell to Syktyvkar

May 1944 was close to the deadline for all those who registered to leave for central Russia. When our time came, my family and I and many others gathered at a pier where there were boats that would take us from Syktyvkar on a three-day trip back down the river. This transport would not be nearly as rough as the one we arrived on - there were places for us to rest and lie down in the riverboat, which seemed like luxury compared to our early 1940's trip.

As we were gathered at the riverside to be reloaded onto the steamboats, I met Gittel again. When we saw each other, I called to her that we should try to find a place on the boat near each other. She agreed, but my family objected very strongly to this new female interest in my life, especially since this was wartime and no one could anticipate what the future would hold for us.

My friend Vyera had heard about the departure, and she came to the pier to see me off. We walked together for a little while and she asked me why I had stopped seeing her. I said that I was busy, healing from the wound that took a couple of months to clear up, and, frankly, I saw no reason to become more involved with her. I had no idea where I was headed, perhaps I would be mobilized to the Russian armed forces and sent to the front, so I didn't want to become deeply involved with anyone. Since it was not too far from the pier, she invited me back to her apartment. I agreed, and stayed there until boarding time.

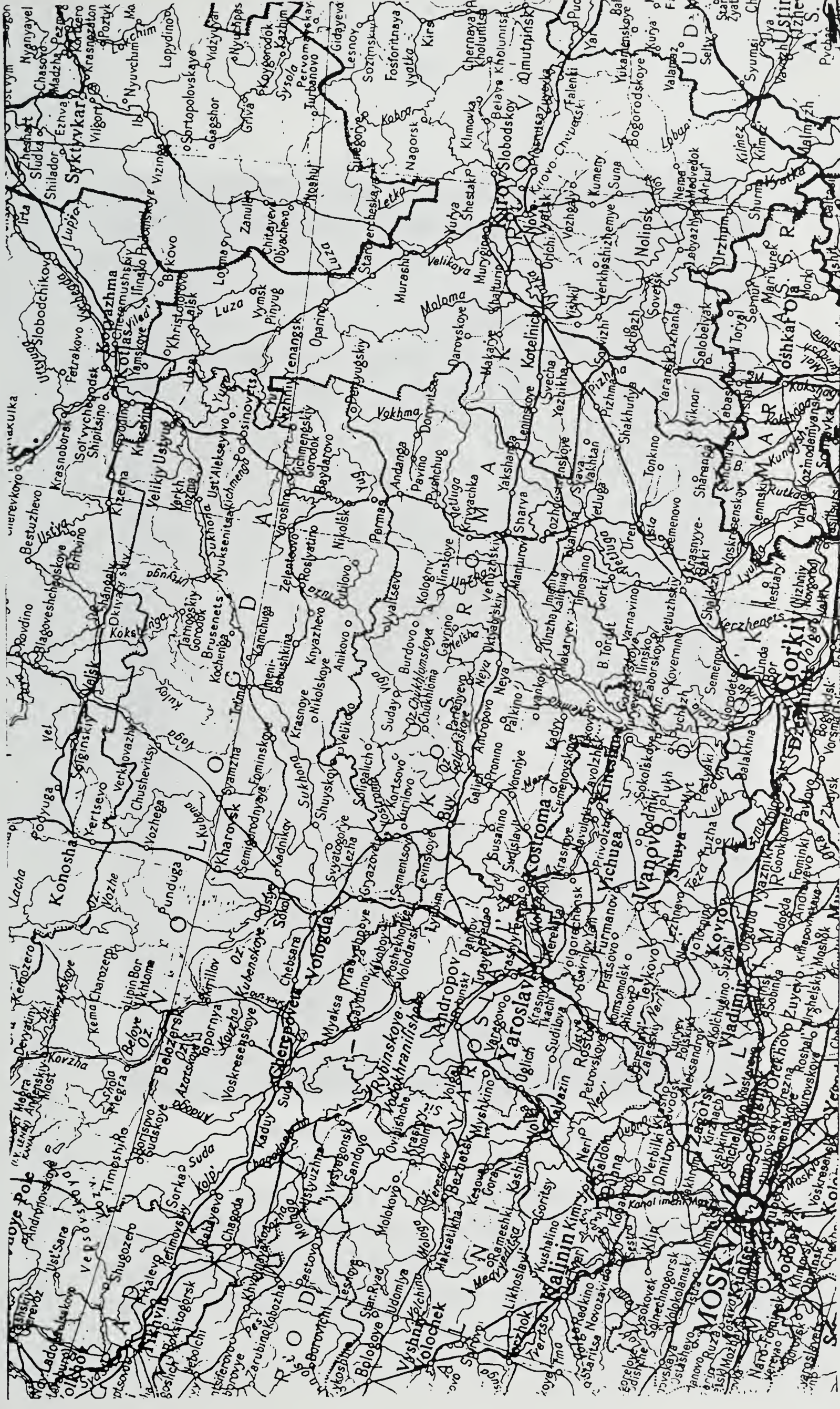
She made some sandwiches and we had some lunch. She tried to show more affectionate to me, and, since it was our last meeting, to be more upbeat. She wanted this to be a memorable farewell. But I excused myself like a gentleman and came up with a number of excuses and gave many reasons why we should stop right there, since there was no future for us. She took out a little picture of herself and shoved it into my jacket pocket, telling me to keep it to remember her. Then we said good-bye.

When I returned to the pier, Gittel was there and asked me where I had been. I told her, since she knew about Vyera. I made no excuses and told her exactly what happened. She was glad to see me and wondered if we could stay together on the boat. Others from my family were there, too - my two sisters and my mother - so we all tried to stay together in one group and not become separated if possible.

For three days and three nights we traveled down the Russian rivers. After three days we found ourselves again at the city of Kotlas. Kotlas is where the railroad stations commenced. At Kotlas we were assigned to another transport - this time cattle trains with two sections on the bottom and top where people could sleep. When we reached the train station

at Kotlas where our transport continued, I said to Gittel that, regardless of my family's objections, I hoped she would try to board the same railroad car that my family and I were on. These railroad cars differed from the arrival trip of a few years earlier. We were not packed like cattle and the cars were cleaner and prepared for human comfort, with platforms on either side of the train where we could sleep and keep our belongings. There were no guards at the stops along the way, and the doors were allowed to be open. Although the trip back took another three weeks, the hardships were not like our last excursion across Russia.

Gittel and I became closer during this period. When the train stopped, we walked together at the train stations. Our Russian passports and official papers referred to us as "Polish patriots". There were thousands of people like us headed back, about 95% of whom were Polish Jews.



When we neared Moscow, the transport stopped for a day. A group of my boxcar friends, people I had befriended over the course of the trip, including one woman and four other men, and I decided to try to see Moscow. The train actually stopped in the outskirts of Moscow, so we left the train and hitchhiked to the center of Moscow. Gittel didn't want to go and stayed back at the train station.



Gerzon and train pals in Moscow

My friends and I walked in Moscow's Red Square, we strolled along the bazaar, we rode on the streetcars, and spent quite a few hours in the city. We even took some photographs which I still have today. Our spirits ran high that

day. We felt that for us the end of the war was in sight and soon we would be back home. We did not believe the tales of horror about those who stayed behind in Poland during the war. They were too terrible and inhuman to be true. We could not believe that a civilized country in the 1940's would be capable of such atrocities. We hoped that we would soon be reunited with the family and friends we had left in Poland in 1940.

After our little trip into Moscow, when we returned to the station where our train had dropped us off, we found that it was gone and we had been left behind!

We explained to the authorities at the station that we had missed our transport when we went off to see Moscow. An official pointed out that there was a faster cargo train, not for passenger transport but for merchandise, which was about to leave the station, and he suggested we climb on top. This train would catch up with the other train, since it had fewer stops. So, we hopped aboard one of the open-air cars and the train raced down the tracks. About four hours later, we caught up to our original transport train and rejoined our friends and family.

The trip was slow and arduous. At each station there was usually a long stopover, so the trip took at least three more weeks.

Next Stop: Shebekino

When we reached our destination, we were once again subdivided into smaller groups and transported to a number of villages in central Russia. Sometime in June we wound up in a small town between the two cities of Jarkov and Kursk called Shebekino. We were assigned to different jobs and living quarters with other people.



Map of the central Russian region that includes Shebekino.

My family continued to object to my relationship with Gittel, but my feelings had grown stronger for her. I decided to move in with her and another family from Lodz who had been in Syktyvkar. They were a couple with a young baby. We all shared one room and stayed there about one week when we learned of our new assignments. Meanwhile, Gittel and I became more and more attached to one another.



Close-up view of map of Shebekino and Logovoy.

We were required to perform agricultural work, helping with the cultivation of turnips and sugar cane, and putting back on line a sugar factory which had been half destroyed during the German occupation. There was also a crippled tannery in town, but it was still salvageable. I visited the management of the tannery to see about working there. My old friend from Syktyvkar who worked with me at the tannery there, Moshe Frisch, and I both presented our letters of recommendation from Syktyvkar. The management at the tannery said they would be glad to hire us, but we needed the proper approval from the authorities that we were free to work at the tannery. It seemed that we had been assigned to

another authority which had other plans for us, namely farm work.

We were so discouraged that we jumped on a train that took us to Jarkov where we hoped to find a factory job in the city which would be preferable to farm labor. We also hoped Russian Jews in Jarkov might be willing to help us out.

Once in Kharkov, we gleaned whatever information we could about job prospects and soon headed for a large tannery in town managed by a Russian Jew who sympathetically listened to our predicament. But he, too, was unable to help us without authority from the group from which we had "escaped." We assured him that we had not escaped, but merely took a train trip to town. He informed us that even that brazen act was a violation of the rules, and that we were not allowed to travel independently without written permission. He finally conceded that with permission from Shebekino he would allow us to work for him in Jarkov.

We were hungry, a little lost, and unsure about what to do next. We stopped at a marketplace and bought some food and discussed our next steps. We decided that the following day we would return by train to Shebekino.

Just then, a person in plain clothes, a member of the secret police, approached and asked to see our documents. He questioned us and we answered respectfully. He confessed that he, himself, was a Jew who had escaped in 1941 from Lvov, and his entire family was left behind. He was recruited into the Russian army and had been wounded in battle. Upon release from the hospital, he took a job as a secret police agent. He looked my age, about 22 years old. He lived nearby with his wife, a Russian woman. He offered us overnight lodging in his house and the following day we would

return to Shebekino.

He gave us a meal, a place to sleep, introduced us to his beautiful Russian wife, and told us horror stories about the Germans as they advanced into Russia. He described slaughters of people like sheep. His entire family was annihilated and he was the only survivor.

The following day he escorted us to the station and we arrived in Shebekino in a few days. We had been absent for almost a week and the authorities were furious when they confronted us. They threatened severe punishment to us and we were ordered to report to the NKVD, the secret police in Shebekino.

When I did return to the street where I had settled in Shebekino, it was midday and no one was expecting us back. As I neared our quarters, I saw in the distance young Gittel dragging a heavy bucket of water from the well. When she realized I had returned, she dropped her pail of water and ran towards me. "I am so glad you are back! I thought you would never come back!" she exclaimed. Although she was glad to see me, I could also see that she was disappointed that I had not confided to her my plans to leave. I reminded her that I did tell her I refused to stay in that town unless I could work at a factory, but I had not told her any more than that.

She was so happy to see me. And I said to myself, "This is like the story in the Bible when the wanderer Jacob came to the oasis and said to himself, 'The first woman I see who brings me water to drink will be my wife.'" I had to admit that I was very happy to see her, too. We enjoyed our reunion together. I recounted to her all that had happened to us and she confirmed that the authorities had come looking for us and they said that as soon as we returned we were to report to them.

I felt justified about taking the trip. After all, they had been unwilling to give us the jobs we wanted and for which we were qualified. The next day we faced the music in the office of the NKVD and explained our motives for traveling to Jarkov. We presented our case that we felt we could be more useful to the country's recovery by working in the tannery rather than in the fields. The supervisor of the NKVD agreed with us, made a few phone calls, and then turned to us and said, "I should punish you two for leaving Shebekino without permission, but I will dispense with the punishment and you are to report directly to the factory and take jobs as supervisors similar to your last jobs."

My friend and I were hired as we wished, and I returned to the place where Gittel and I were staying with that other family. I told her the good news and we decided we would try to find a place of our own as soon as possible.

Our lodging with the young family was quite inconvenient - far from the factory and baby cries throughout the night. I sought housing in the village near the factory. The name of the village was Logovoy, within walking distance, about two miles, from the factory. It was a village of collective farms and single story country houses. One family offered to rent us a small home with a kitchen and a main room. There was a barn off the house. The cost was 75 rubles per month. We moved in the following day. This was mid-summer 1944.

At work in my new supervisory position I quickly earned the respect of my co-workers. Life looked hopeful.

I proposed to Gittel, and we were married by a justice of the peace in the town, much to the chagrin of my family who did not see this as a true marriage since we did not have

a religious ceremony.

We lived in our little home in the village. The rest of my family lived in town, and they openly displayed their disappointment that I had married. I was typical of the young people of any generation - unwilling to accept any advice from the older generation. I did not regret marrying Gittel. I only regretted the unhappiness that my family caused by their disapproval.

I understood their anger. The customs of that time did not allow for younger siblings to marry until the older siblings were wed. By marrying Gittel, I had ignored the social norms, since my two older sisters were still unmarried. This was taboo in those days, and Gittel and I suffered the wrath of my mother and sisters as a result.

At that time my sister Pearl met a man that I knew personally who had returned from the Russian labor camps and we became friends. He was a shoemaker and had worked in the shoe factory while I worked in the tannery in Syktyvkar. He was a single man by the name of Jacob Sandrovich who had been torn apart from his family in Poland and dragged to a concentration camp in the north where he suffered with many other single people. When he finally returned from this ordeal, he became acquainted with me and my sister, and he fell in love with my sister. He soon proposed marriage to her.

They set a wedding date and in the beginning of 1945 they married, with the blessings of my mother. Theirs was a Jewish wedding ceremony, that is, a Jewish shoemaker presided over the service. My mother suggested that, as long as this traditional ceremony was taking place, I may as well be married in the eyes of God when my sister wed. Gittel and I agreed to do this to please my mother. After that, our rela-

tionship with my mother improved somewhat, especially when she could see that we were truly committed to each other.

Months passed and in our home we hosted many visits of friends and family. The war for us had effectively ended. More and more cities were taken over by the Allies in Poland. Many heroes returned from the front to their families, and we celebrated many triumphant homecomings of these brave men.

One night, a group of newly returned Russian heroes with whom I had become acquainted invited us to celebrate their victories. Gittel declined the invitation, but I went along. We traveled in sleighs from one house to the next, and they partied hard, attempting to get the entire group of us to join in the revelry and get drunk. Spirits were running high. Drinking and dancing were the order of the day, to the strains of harmonica and accordion music. The party lasted well into the night, and most of the Russians fell into a drunken stupor. Their girlfriends had to drive the sleighs to take them home. Early on I pretended to be drunk to keep from being forced to drink in excess. The drink was mainly *samagon*, a home-made whiskey which they drank out of teacups. Coupled with very little food in their stomachs, they became drunk quickly.

When the party ended, all the inebriated passengers were delivered to their homes by the girlfriends managing the sleighs. When I returned home, my wife demanded explanations about my absence throughout the day. I explained that I had no way of getting back home until then because we had driven all around the countryside picking up and delivering people. She was peeved with me, but there was good reason to celebrate. The war was truly ended, all rumors pointed to it, and that was great news. We could have a glim-

mer of hope that civilization was returning to our lives, that justice would prevail at last, and the world would be a better place in which to live.

We learned that Gittel was pregnant. My sister also conceived her first child around that time.

When spring arrived I was still working at my job, but news was increasingly definitive that the war was winding down. In April 1945, while I was at work in the tannery in Shebekino, the director called me in and announced that approximately four hundred German prisoners of war were at the tannery and they needed someone who spoke German to translate instructions. They asked for my assistance to help manage the large group of prisoners who would be laborers in the tannery to repair the factory and rebuild it. These prisoners would be under guard for daytime assignments. I agreed to help.

When the first group of Germans arrived, there were some Russian governmental dignitaries and a German prisoner-of-war who had been captured in Stalingrad in 1943, a senior prisoner who served as an intermediary and interpreter. He spoke some Russian. He and I worked together - I taught him more Russian and verified his instructions to the laborers. His name was Hans and he came from Hamburg - a tall, strapping 25-year-old - and he received preferential treatment due to his seniority as a prisoner of war and his cooperation with the Russians. He led the other prisoners to the factory each day.

As I got to know Hans, I learned that he was among the first soldiers who crossed Poland and marched all the way to Stalingrad in 1941. He described the horrors inflicted by the German army during the war. We talked for hours. His stories are still fresh in my mind, particularly the atrocities

inflicted by the Nazis and the Poles upon the Jewish populations they encountered. But the Jews were not the only victims. He recounted the slaughtering of Polish officers at Khotan, a mysterious murder of many Polish military leaders. He divulged to me that these officers who had remained in Poland had encountered German troops passing through Khotan, and the Germans massacred them but spread the word that this massacre was at the hands of the Russians.

1945 - The End of Our Russian Captivity

During the spring and early summer of 1945, Hans and I developed a good friendship. Then orders were issued that we refugees were allowed to return to Poland since the war had ended. Poland had been freed. In the summer of 1945, on the day we were released to travel back to Poland, Hans presented me with a rucksack from him.

I also became acquainted with a returning Russian Jewish soldier who had been wounded five times during the war. His name was Matei Abramovich. During some of the massive destruction of Shebekino over the course of the war, Matei's wife and two children were killed. She was a Russian woman who bore him a son and a daughter. In 1941 he was drafted into the Russian army. While he was off to war she remained in Shebekino, and the Germans eventually overran and occupied the town. The Germans killed indiscriminately after destroying all the Jews in the town. Although she was not Jewish, the Germans considered her children Jewish since their father was a Jew, and they seized her children to be slaughtered. When she protested, the Germans gave her an ultimatum: deliver the children and we will spare your life. She refused to part with her children, so the three were shot.

When Matei returned to Shebekino he learned of the fate of his wife and children. Caroline, the younger sister of his wife, survived with her mother. He was grief-stricken as was his mother-in-law who repeatedly faulted the Jewish husband for the death of her daughter. In compensation for her loss he promised to provide for her and her daughter for the rest of their lives. He offered to marry Caroline and she agreed. This was an attractive offer, especially considering that upon his return to town he was promoted to a high-ranking supervisory position in the government and he received

innumerable privileges for being a war hero.

I met him through introductions from my Russian war hero pals who took me along to their celebrations. We became very close friends. We frequently invited Matei and his second wife to our house for dinner, and they reciprocated. He recounted many war stories about the German conquest of Russian territories and the Russians eventually regaining their country from the Germans. He managed to survive five injuries, and his medals and awards testified to his bravery in battle. His body, riddled with bullet wounds and scars, looked like a battlefield.

Carolinichka, his young wife, confided to us that she, too, was expecting a child around the same time ours was due. Nevertheless, her mother could not conceal her anger and ill will towards her son-in-law, still blaming him for the death of her older daughter. The material pleasures he could provide did not make her happy. She constantly remarked, "Because of that Jew, I lost a daughter." She was far from grateful for the comforts he was providing her and Caroline. To forgive and forget was not in her nature.

In my travels, I have encountered hundreds like her - Germans, Poles, Russians - carrying their grudges towards the Jews and even the Americans, blaming them for the destruction of their lives. While many appeared friendly on the surface, eventually their vindictiveness reared its ugly head. I am certain that even today, when the struggles in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere are militarily resolved, nations of people will hold fast their bitterness towards those who disrupted their lives. This aspect of human nature is distressing to me, as it only perpetuates hatred. When I see the faces of the Arabs in the Middle East, I see the faces of my brother and uncles and cousins - all Jews, but products of the same race as the Arabs who so fiercely hate the Jews today. I wish

they could realize we are all of the same origin - all long-lost brothers - but I regret to see that they perpetuate hatred instead.

The birth of our son was a difficult and confusing event for my wife. She had lost her parents at such a young age and had led such a sheltered life that she was unfamiliar with the process of childbirth. A midwife tended to her during childbirth and other women assisted as well. She reported to me afterwards that she lay there screaming in the throes of heavy labor, wondering if she'd ever survive this, and she finally asked the midwife, "I see no progress at all. How can a baby ever come out of my belly button?" The midwife scolded her for not knowing, and explained to her from where the baby would finally be exiting.

A few weeks following the birth of my son Benjamin at the end of 1945, the Russians announced to us that we would be allowed to leave central Russia and return to Poland in early 1946.

Chapter 7

Return to Poland

1946 was a joyful year for those who had survived the ordeals of war. Our spirits quickly deflated upon our return to Poland, however, where we were greeted with the devastation of our country and the derision of our countrymen. Polish survivors began the weighty task of rebuilding their lives in Poland. But Poland was a different country. When the Poles had regained their homeland, rather than welcome the returning Jews, they scorned and mistreated them. Although only a fraction of the Polish Jewish population, perhaps 250,000 of the original 3.5 million Jews, returned home, the Poles behaved as if they wished no one had returned. Our Russian papers identified us as "Polish Patriots." We half expected to be welcomed as heroes or long-lost brothers. Instead, we were treated as intruders who deserved to be shot on sight. In 1946 pogroms began once more against the Jewish survivors, testifying to the Poles' unending hatred of the Jewish race.

Through the Bible people are taught to love their neighbors as themselves. It is dismaying to see how this biblical lesson goes unheeded by too many supposedly God-fearing people. Religious leaders continued to foment hatred even then, and to this day we continue to see evil leaders, in the name of religion, stir up hatred among peoples of the world. I refuse to believe that this, too, is the will of God.

My wife, my few-months-old son Benjamin, and I finally returned from Russia to Poland in the spring of 1946. I learned that my older brother Jacob and his wife and two children had also survived and were living in the city of Lodz. He came to greet us at the transport and insisted that

we come stay with him. At first I was reluctant, but later I agreed. We picked up the few bundles we had and moved into his small apartment. They had an extra room which was not very large, so my mother, my two sisters, my sister's husband and baby, my wife, my son and I all stayed in that one room. We slept on the floor. Of course, it was inconvenient, but we had to forego comfort and try to survive and do our best.

I went out to the city to assess the conditions and see what I could do to begin to be productive again. We found out that a couple of my wife's cousins were saved by a Polish family and living in Lodz. One of those cousins had opened a store and changed his name and survived as a Christian.

We visited him and immediately sensed his discomfort. He had a Catholic wife and asked us to not make known that we are Jewish, and he insisted that he was no longer Jewish. He was extremely secretive about our visit. I was not surprised, because many of those who survived did so by being hidden by non-Jewish villagers who took them in either for money or out of sympathy. Not too many Jews were saved because at that time the Poles blamed Jews for their troubles and the war, so how could they be very sympathetic to Jews? They also wanted to keep the properties that they had confiscated when the Jews left. In short, they preferred to see us gone and never return again. There were stories of Jews killed on sight, and we quickly learned that we faced great danger by remaining in Poland.

I stayed about six weeks in my brother's house. During that time, first I tried to earn some cash by selling some possessions in the open market where people did their daily shopping. I brought to the marketplace the few possessions I had to sell and laid them out on the ground for public

inspection. One of the items for sale was a cousin's boots - tall leather ones which resembled German boots - which he gave us to sell in such an anxious way that I sensed that he was trying to get them out of his store. I said I'd do my best to sell them for him, but made no promises. I also tried to sell a Vauklander camera I used the last couple of years in Russia which I had brought back with me. At that time the camera was my most valuable possession. The camera sold very quickly and I received a good price for it.

While I was busy selling other things, and with the confusion of the crowds that had gathered, I was unaware that there were also thieves at work. When I turned to look, after making one of my sales, I saw that the boots the cousin gave me were gone. They would have brought in a good price, but the thief was a professional and these disappeared in the blink of an eye. It was unavoidable and I couldn't even report it to the police because in those days theft was commonplace. I took it in stride, but I never returned to the cousin to tell him the bad news.

What next, I wondered. Many people were traveling up to the Czechoslovakian border to towns like Walfrig and Gritza in the Carpathian Mountains, where there were many German families still residing. They often sold their possessions which others, in turn, would bring back into Lodz and other cities as far as Russia, for resale in the marketplace. My brother and I earned our living early on by doing the same.

I didn't like this line of work, though. I had tried to get a job in a tannery or a factory, but they were not hiring Jews. Discrimination was rampant. Meanwhile, Jewish committees were forming, encouraging Jews to leave Poland for their own well-being and safety.

We discovered during this time that my Uncle Pinchas Kassel had survived the war. He came to visit us. Although he had returned, his wife and three children did not - they had been shipped to concentration camps during the war and died there. Uncle Pinchas had survived as an underground fighter with the Russian resistance movement from 1941 to 1946. It was there in Lodz after the war that he recounted to me many of his adventures.



Uncle Pinchas Kassel with Gerzon's sister Pearl, husband Jacob Sandrovich, and daughter Rose, in Lodz after the war

He described his experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto, the horrors that occurred throughout Poland during the war, and the resistance assignments he undertook. Not surprising-

ly, he faced prejudice even when he entered the underground forces. First he was ridiculed. Then they hesitated to take him in, for they did not trust his military prowess. To prove that he was qualified, he had to take an assignment which would show that he was willing to fight to the death. The assignment consisted of joining a group which attacked a German outpost. During the skirmish this group was intentionally left behind in the Polish-German territory, but they did not supply Pinchas with a gun - he had to procure his own gun. On that first assignment, in hand-to-hand combat, he acquired his first gun. Once armed, he was accepted into the underground forces.

Uncle Pinchas undertook many dangerous assignments, ones in which some of his comrades and close friends were killed. Deaths were not only at the hands of the Germans. Several competing groups were fighting the Germans, such as fascist groups who hated those who joined Russian groups, and these groups also killed one another when they came in contact, even though they fought the same enemy.

On occasion, Uncle Pinchas entered the town ghettos to recruit resistance fighters from among the able-bodied ghetto youths. Often the ghetto leaders were hostile towards him and his efforts. Although he pleaded with them, warning them that they were to be slaughtered like sheep in extermination camps, his words frequently fell on deaf ears. In fact, rather than support him and the underground's efforts by supplying recruits, many of the ghetto dwellers instead betrayed resistance fighters and delivered them to the Nazis to be executed as a way of appeasing the Nazis and showing them how cooperative they were. While many resistance fighters managed to escape, some were executed right in the ghetto as an example to those who might be considering a career in the resistance. Eventually, these Nazi "collaborators" paid their dues.

After the war, Uncle Pinchas, too, was involved in our trips to the south of Poland to bring merchandise back for resale. The Polish authorities allowed these activities because there was so much unemployment and so many refugees returning and simply trying to survive post-war conditions, and the economy could not absorb them any other way.



Gerzon's brother Jacob Trzcina, wife Cyrille, and sons Abram and Benjamin in Poland in 1946

I saw no future in remaining in Poland. Newspapers reported increasingly ominous activities. Jewish survivors in particular, upon reaching their home towns and requesting the return of their properties, were repaid with violence and chased out of town. In the town of Kelz the inhabitants organized a pogrom and in one day killed 42 families that had survived the Holocaust. The Poles and the authorities merely looked the other way. The Russian occupation began, and the Russian authorities claimed they could do nothing because their role was to observe the activities and behavior of the Polish but not become involved. I would not blame the Russian occupational army for the violence, because the same groups that killed Jews killed Russian soldiers after the war ended, claiming that the Russians were evil Communists trying to take over their country. The Polish killers were merely outlaws and vigilantes, and the Polish government, in their lack of punishment of these people, were encouraging them to continue their violent acts.

I would estimate that about 200,000 survivors returned to Poland after living through all the horrors of the war. But, after the pogroms began again, there was a massive exodus from Poland of most of these survivors. They fled wherever they could.

After a few weeks of living under these circumstances and concerned about the burden on my brother as well as the safety of our family, I decided to take the chance of escape with my family, too. A Jewish organization provided us with a list of contacts who assisted in escapes through Czechoslovakia. Groups of fifty to one hundred young people made the journey with these helpers. My wife and I were only 24 years old at that time, and mostly people in that age group attempted this type of escape. The Jewish organization had a purpose for us, and encouraged us to leave the country.

So we packed up our belongings, I announced to my brother that we were leaving, and we headed for the railroad station. Uncle Pinchas took us to the station to say good-bye. At the station he gave me a small token for good luck, a gold Russian ten-ruble coin, which he put in my pocket. I said to him, "You're all alone. Why don't you come with us?" He said, "You are young. I am already old, in my mid-forties. I am too old. Plus, I am a little depressed because I lost my whole family, including my brothers and all the rest of them." They were massacred among the group that had escaped to the Russian side like we did, but who had taken Russian passports. He also told me that he just learned that one of his brothers, Zelig Kassel, the one who had been in Warsaw before I escaped, had also perished. But, while in Russia, I had received a letter from two of their sons who had survived for awhile. One was a doctor, the other was attending college. They had managed to cross over into the Russian side in 1940, leaving behind their parents and two younger brothers. By then, those who remained were stuck in the Warsaw Ghetto, so they perished in the Warsaw Ghetto.



Gerzon's cousins from Makow Mazowiecki who perished during the Holocaust

Besides, Uncle Pinchas had big plans. He discovered that his properties were still intact and when he tried to reclaim them the authorities told him that once he paid some property taxes on them they would return his real estate to him. His plans were to pay the taxes and get back to work rebuilding his businesses. That was his next goal.

After I said good-bye to Uncle Pinchas, I felt a hopelessness and loss that he did not escape with us. I never saw him again.

I continued to search for Pinchas Kassel until the 1990's. In 1991 I finally received word after writing to the Polish embassy in Washington, D.C. They officially informed me that he could not be located and that there was no record of him surviving after the war. They had no other information about him or his past, and they believed that he died before the war ended. I knew this was untrue since I had been with him after the war and knew that he had presented himself to the Polish authorities in Lodz. This is quite suspicious, but not surprising.

The information the Polish government did provide me was certainly inaccurate. Firstly, they documented his date of birth as at least ten years earlier than I know is correct. They recorded that he was born in 1892. I believe it was more like 1904. He was born in Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, he had a brother Abraham, a second brother Zelig, a sister Dina who was my mother, and another sister Ruchel. His father was Haskell Kassel, who was killed in the massacre in the Jewish temple in Krasnosielc in 1939.

As I recall, in Krasnosielc Mazowiecki he entered military service at age 20 and finished as a corporal of the Polish army. This must also be officially recorded somewhere. Also, around the beginning of the 1930's he had built

his two-story block of buildings in his name, the upper floors of which were leased by the municipality as government offices. He also had a trucking company and a Chevrolet truck which he personally drove to Warsaw and surrounding towns. Later, he imported a new Chevrolet from the U.S. He married in the late 1920's a woman who was the only daughter of the grain wholesaling baron. These were all well-known facts and many on public record.

I have my own theory that the lack of information on him is part of a cover-up of some kind. My guess is that after Uncle Pinchas paid his taxes in order to reclaim his buildings, but then he was murdered like so many other Jews who wanted their property back when they returned.

Currently the Polish government is in the midst of establishing a democracy, but they continue to cover up both the robberies they have inflicted in the past on the Jewish population when they confiscated their pre-war possessions, and their misdeeds following the war when the Jews returned. If they wish to show good faith, they should as a first step acknowledge the true ownership of any confiscated real estate and compensate the rightful owners who survived. The West has provided Poland with millions of dollars in foreign aid. Who is investigating those stolen properties from an estimated 20,000 survivors who now live in the U.S. and another 10,000 in Canada? The Polish government continues to ignore and deny these incidents and have gotten away with robbery scot-free.

Pinchas Kassel was a hero, one of thousands of partisan fighters who helped the country of Poland in the war effort so they could restore their nation. Yet the present policy in Poland continues to ignore the facts and forget the lessons of the Second World War. Anti-semitic feelings are still harbored by the Polish nation, and many hope the history of

their mistreatment of Jews will just disappear. But I will not allow that to happen. If we cover up atrocities, they will happen again.

Chapter 8

Good-bye and Good Rid- dance to Poland

Escape from Poland

Our escape through southern Poland to Czechoslovakia was not an easy one. We had to keep our presence secret and sneak through. We were divided into groups of one hundred people or fewer. At night we slept in different places along the way, laying on our bundles and planning our progress such that by early morning we would cross the border.

At the border lurked danger - thieves and vigilantes looking for people to rob and kill. I would estimate that in 1946, during this mass exodus of people attempting to escape Poland, thousands of innocent survivors were killed at the hands of these vigilantes who called themselves "Freedom Fighters," referring to freedom from Jews. Their propaganda proclaimed, "A clean Poland without Jews." They managed to do quite a bit of damage to the Jewish population that had returned to Poland. The newspapers didn't mention much about it, nor did the outside or international press who squelched any information they may have had about these incidents. They only gave good coverage to one large pogrom which took place in broad daylight in the town of Kielce during the summer of 1946. It was so brutal that the news media could not ignore it. But the smaller incidents - ten fatalities here, fifty casualties there, people shot as they were pulled off trains returning to Poland, their mur-

derers looking into the eyes of each one who exited the trains to decide which one was a Jew who should be killed.



Escape from Poland

As we neared the Czech border, our movement was more organized, since special groups of dedicated young people worked along the way. They were volunteers gathered in small encampments near the border, who kept watch for people like us. They were also armed, but those who could attack us were far better equipped.

Our particular group made it to the border with only one casualty at the hands of the vigilantes. When we were attacked, we fought back a bit and then the attackers disappeared. The next morning we crossed the border where a transport which had been arranged by the volunteers awaited us. There was food and drink. Many of us were families with very young children. They arranged to have families like ours in one wagon, and there the Red Cross helped us. In that last stretch we had just walked about three kilometers with all our bundles. Gittel held our baby in a carrier slung across her chest, and she lugged a rucksack with all the baby's needs on her back. I carried all the rest of our belongings, which hung from every part of my body. I almost collapsed from the weight and exhaustion.

We hurried to the transport train which then brought us to our next destination. This train was a passenger train and extremely comfortable compared to what we were used to. We were told that our next stop was Vienna, Austria. In Vienna, we would be taken directly to the Rothschild Hotel where we would stay one day. On the train, we were instructed to hand in all our documents, to be given to the Jewish volunteer organization. Their reason was that if the Russians were to stop us and search our documents, they may question our escape. We were even asked to hand in all photographs. Everyone began to give up their papers. Although I held all my documents and personal photographs that had survived the war, when it was time to relinquish them to the authorities I kept all the photos.

Luckily we arrived at the hotel without incident. We stayed at the hotel one night. By then our group was much larger. We were next scheduled to travel across the Austrian border to the German side, where a U.S. zone was established. Cities like Vienna were divided into four zones: U.S., Russian, British and French. Berlin was also divided this way. Our hotel was in the U.S. zone.

Our next train carried about 3,000 Jewish survivors. We were then transported to an Austrian camp called Puch Vaisalzburg. This was a military camp with barracks, practically on the border of Italy and Austria. There were huge mountains on one side, and we were told that on the other side of those mountains was Italy. We had never seen the Alps before and they were breathtaking!

We then boarded another train and crossed quickly into Bavaria. We arrived at a military base where soldiers were stationed. The U.S. soldiers took us to their encampment which was outdoors, with field kitchens and many tents. They lived in tents, and they had prepared tents for us, too. Before they took us into the tents, though, we had to undergo a military inspection, and were taken to a special area where we were separated into male and female groups, we undressed ourselves, and were then sprayed with a disinfectant power. Then we all dressed, and about 200 yards away from the military encampment were the tents set up for the refugees. They called this a quarantine camp and informed us that we would have to remain there for two weeks, separated from our spouses and children. We lined up for meals and provisions. Every mealtime they signalled when we were to line up for breakfast or dinner. Two meals a day was already a great luxury for us because most of us had been subsisting for years on only one meager meal over

a 24-hour period. We were grateful to the American army for giving us the helping hand.

The Displaced Persons Camps



Gerzon in 1946 in the U.S. zone in Wilzig, Germany

After two weeks in quarantine, we were loaded onto trucks and brought to another transport. Again, the group of three thousand people took trains to the German U.S. zone

on the Bavarian side to a place called Wilzig Altenhaus, which was also a military base with buildings two and three stories high, probably one of Hitler's military bases during the war. This was being used as a U.S. military base and empty barracks had been prepared for the three thousand arriving refugees. At that time they registered us and gave us some temporary U.S. certificates.

Families with children were assigned to three blocks of buildings. The rest of the buildings were divided among all the singles and families without children. We received a small room.

The following day there was a general meeting for all. Some officials arrived. One was a commander from England from the International Refugee Organization, UNRA, and the other was a Jewish rabbi. He spoke in broken Yiddish and English and gave us an orientation about what to expect. He was from England, I heard, probably a volunteer. We were told that we would be temporarily settled in this camp. They asked us to complete forms which described our professions, so I said that I was a photographer because at that time I was already in that business a bit and I liked it. I also listed my experience as a technician in a tannery. The UNRA immediately assigned me to go on photographic assignments for them.



Photographer in Germany for the UNRA

There were refugees by the hundreds of thousands arriving all over Europe in encampments such as ours. Jews were assigned separate encampments from other refugees, to protect them from those who harbored anti-semitic feelings and to control any potential violence. If an incident did occur, the guilty parties would be immediately deported back to the Russian side. So, in general, people were well behaved.

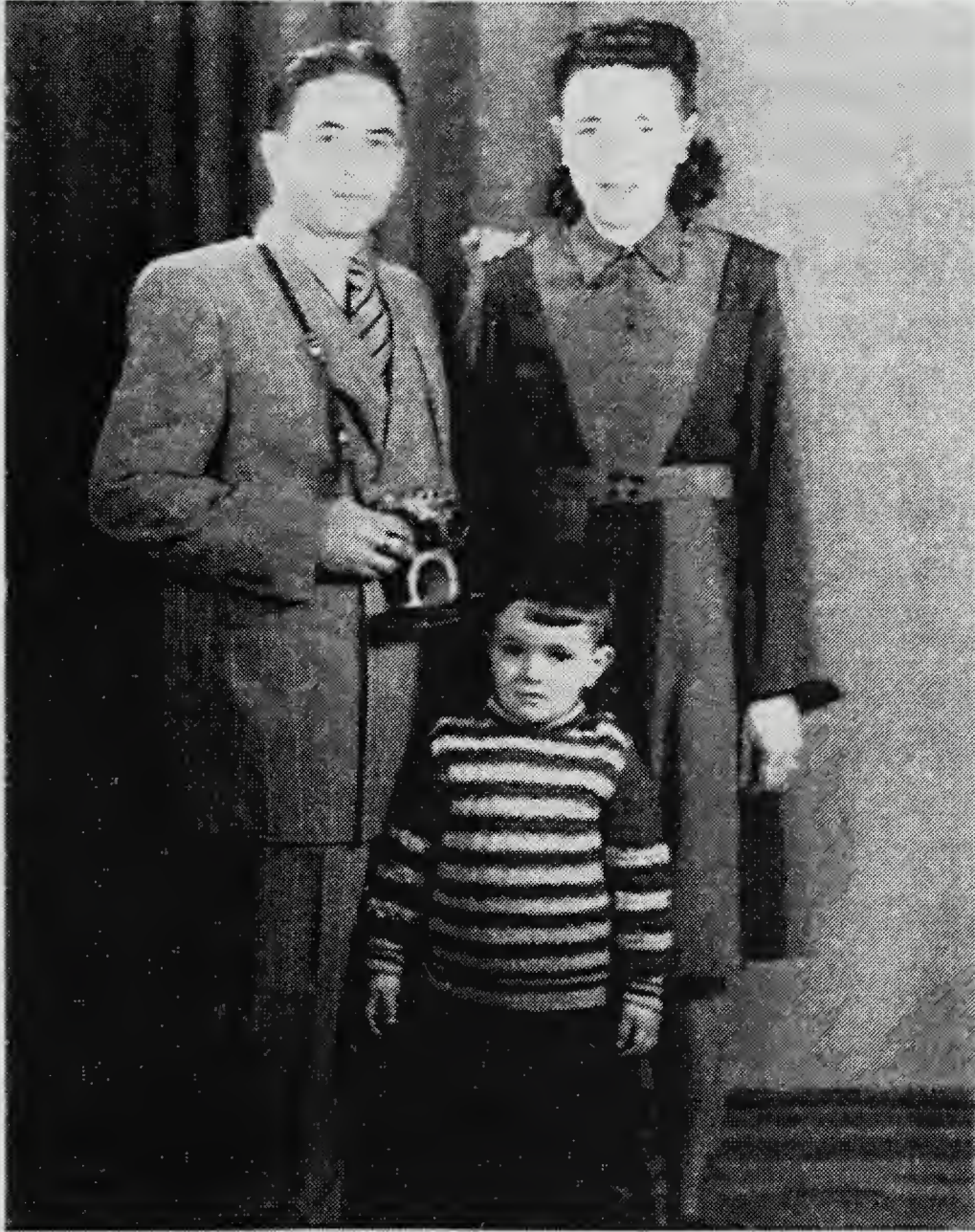
I organized my photographic facility in that camp. Under the auspices of the army, with military jeeps and an assistant assigned to me who was also a Jewish survivor,

they drove us around for months to take photographs. My assistant was disabled in one foot and he limped, and I lost track of him after this assignment. We did the job and they supplied the materials. I owned two 35mm cameras. One was a Russian Leica, an imitation of the German Leica, which worked well, and the other was a 35mm German Retinaur which was pretty good. These took 36 photos at a time, but I had to provide the film, because the film supplied by the military was in bulk, in batches of hundreds of feet of film. The chemicals they supplied were inadequate, so I made contact with local photographers in other towns such as Bamberg and other Bavarian towns. They didn't want money, but I had to bring something else for trade, including cigarettes and coffee.

Everything else was supplied by the military. They kept all the negatives of my work. I was not paid for my photography, except for the food and packages from the Red Cross, and our room. We did not complain, though.

During this time, the German Deutschemark was still the currency in use but not worth very much. American dollars on the black market bought 300 Deutschemarks. As time went on, they bought even more.

The newly arrived refugees were hungry to have recent photographs to send to friends and families. So, they asked me to do that for them, which I was glad to do for a small fee. They paid me with Deutschemarks, but that was fine with me because I was dealing with some German photographers who took these at a high rate of exchange. With the money I was also able to buy some more equipment. I also purchased coffee or other exchange items when suppliers preferred to trade in merchandise. That was how we managed in the camp.



George, Gertrude and Benjamin in Germany in 1948

We used this time to make contact with Gittel's uncle Jacob and other relatives in the U.S. After we wrote a couple of letters to Uncle Jacob, he responded generously. He sent some packages of food and clothing. Sometimes he even enclosed American dollars. It started with one dollar, then two, then five, then ten. We saved all those dollars. One day, though, the U.S. Postal Service somehow discovered that he was sending American money and he was notified sternly by them not to do this again. So he stopped sending money, but the packages kept coming.

I also contacted a cousin of mine on my father's side who lived in New York since World War I, by the family name of Chaimowitz. Her married name was Helen Vermont. She was generous, too, and sent us packages. She was not a wealthy woman, however. Her husband Bill was a story writer for Twentieth Century Fox, and she had three small children - two older sons, Bert and George, and a younger daughter Harriet.

We stayed in Wilzig-Altenhaus until the end of 1947. Then an order came down from the military that the DP camp was being transformed into a solely military base. The Cold War between Russia and the United States had already begun.

We lived through the Berlin Blockade by then and it was politically tense between the Russian government and all the Western Allies. The major point of contention was the United States' Marshall Plan to help rebuild Europe, including Germany, with the resources of the Allies. France and Germany could not contribute much, so most of this support came from the United States, including the airlift to Berlin, a city which was divided into four sections for each of the major powers. When the blockade occurred, the supplies of food into the Soviet part of Germany were halted.

In 1948, the blockade stopped and settled into more normalcy, but the U.S. military was more alert to potential problems and needed to establish a larger military base. So the group of three thousand remaining at Wilzig-Altenhaus were transported deeper into Bavaria to a place called Giberstadt. There were also two sections here, one which used to be a military base and another section about one mile away. So our group was divided in half and resettled to this base.

The German monetary situation was at crisis levels by then, so the powers in control decided to liquidate the German currency. They printed new German currency for the Republic of Germany, rendering absolutely worthless the former German Deutschemark. Each displaced person in the camp was allocated 20 new marks to begin with, but any other Deutschemarks they had were worth no more than the paper they were printed on.

We began to search for any relatives who may have survived the war, both on my wife's and my side. Our efforts revealed that no one survived from Gittel's immediate family. We did learn of a cousin who had settled in a refugee camp called Lumpertime in the U.S. zone. I decided to visit that camp, which was located 350 kilometers from Wilzig, the Bavarian refugee camp where we were settled. Lumpertime was situated near Frankfurt in northern Germany. We were nearer Munich in the south. I hoped to bring the surviving female cousin back to our camp to be reunited with her cousin Gittel.

The trip took a few days, but I finally found her - a twenty-five-year-old woman with a number tattooed on her wrist which attested to the fact that she had survived the concentration camp at Auschwitz. She was Hannah, the sister of Chaim Lengalka, another cousin of Gittel's. She described her ordeal in Auschwitz, but she had no idea about the whereabouts of her brother Chaim. When she and her family arrived at Auschwitz, the younger members of the family were weeded out to go to the work details while the youngest and eldest were immediately sent to the gas chambers. She knew that she was the only family survivor from Auschwitz.

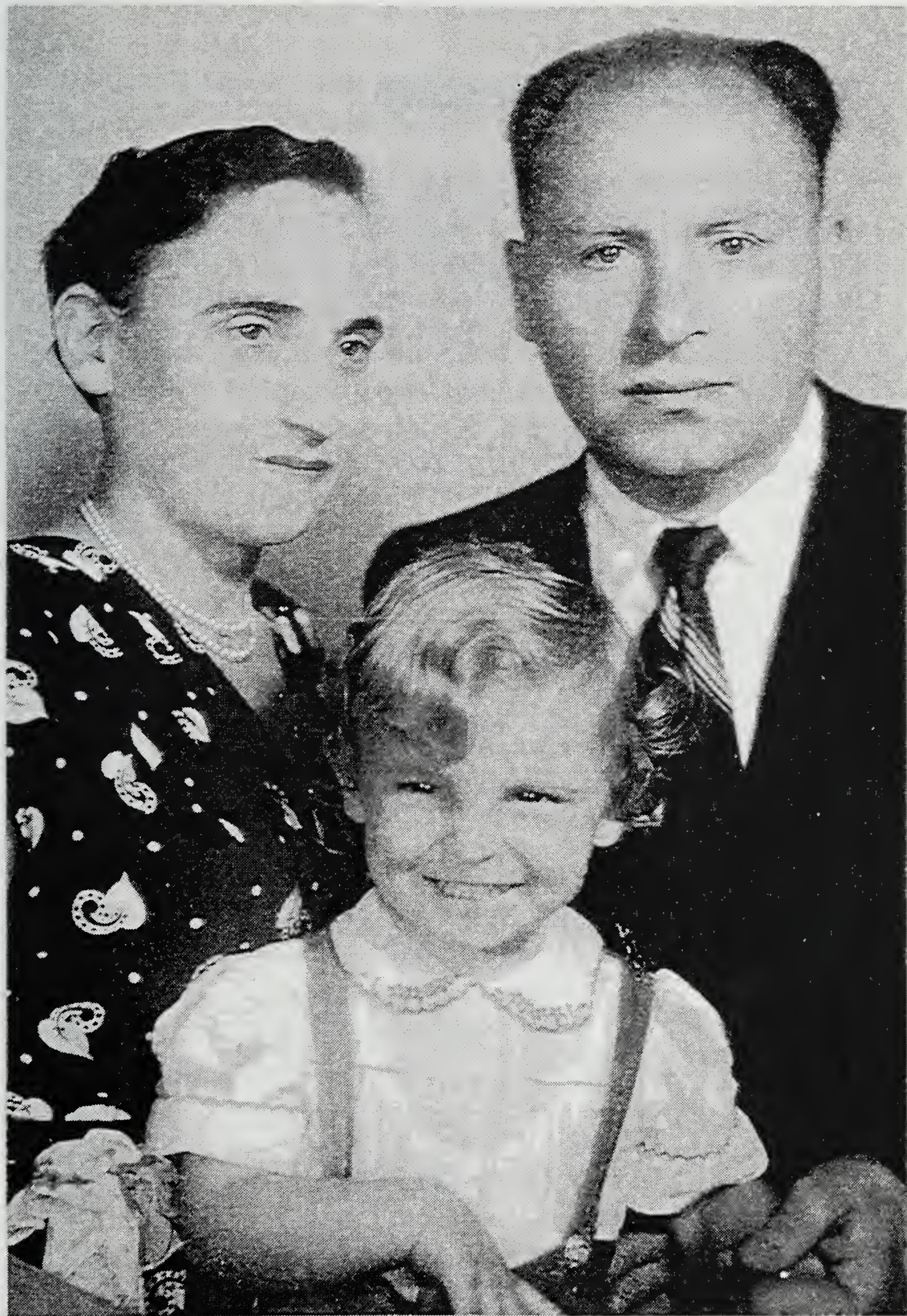
I encouraged her to not give up hope for her brother's safe return and convinced her to come back with me to see her cousin Gittel. She finally agreed, and we traveled another

three days by train. When the two cousins were reunited and embraced, the scene was heart-wrenching. I was gratified that I could accomplish some good. Gittel's cousin had heard that Gittel's father had also ended up at Auschwitz, and the rest of Gittel's family did not survive. I tried to confirm this information and left no stone unturned, researching organizations and leads about survivors.

I introduced Hannah to a man at the camp whose wife and family were killed by the Germans during the war. His name was Veudo Nudel. They hit it off and became very close. They eventually decided to marry and their small wedding took place in my little room in Wilzig.

He and I continued our search for family survivors. He discovered he had a brother who survived and was living in Paris. Upon hearing this, they decided to join them in Paris. We stayed behind in the camp for one more year.

We have kept track of Hannah, and eventually learned the fate of Chaim Lengalka, and finally, in 1954, located their cousin Bella Lengalka, too.



*Gittel's cousin Hannah Lengalka Nudel with husband Veudo
and son Bernard in Australia after the war*

The Story of Chaim Lengalka

When the war broke out in 1939, Chaim Lengalka, a cousin of Gittel Blankitner, was seventeen years old. He, like many teenagers, tried to escape to survive. He is now living in Australia, but his experiences escaping the horrors of the German forces and surviving the war are exemplary of many others.

Chaim was a blue-eyed blond-haired young man who was frequently mistaken for a typical Polish gentile boy. His parents owned a shoe store near Mlawa, in a town called Drobnin. At the outbreak of the war, Chaim decided to escape to the Russian side. He took a train to Warsaw, a city which at that time was already occupied by the Germans, and from there he took another train to Malkin, a Polish border city which had been established between the newly formed Russian and German territories. He managed to reach the border town by train, and then attempted to cross the border.

The Germans were patrolling the border and many young Jews were among the throngs of people attempting to cross. The Germans would carefully scrutinize the faces of those who wished to cross, trying to discern the Jews from the rest. Jews were either sent back with beatings, arrested and shipped to concentration camps, or killed at the border. Chaim was seated in the waiting area of the border station when he met a girl who was also trying to cross to the Russian side. He was eating a Polish kielbasa at the time that the Germans were examining the faces of those awaiting permission to cross. He offered some of his kielbasa to the young girl just as the German soldiers looked into his eyes. The combination of blue eyes, fair hair and Polish pork sausage made them think that he was a Polish gentile, and they passed over him for punishment. The girl was also saved

from the German threat, and within two days the two of them managed to cross the border safely.

Chaim arrived in Bialystok, a city of hundreds of thousands of refugees, overrun by the mobs of hungry and homeless and hopeless. People slept in the streets, in hallways, unbathed, with only the clothing on their backs. Many had not changed their clothing in over three months. Food was strictly rationed, with barely enough coming from the soup kitchens. In a few months, their clothing became torn and threadbare. Any possessions of value were frequently exchanged for food.

Chaim and his friend went their separate ways, so Chaim was on his own, with no job, no shelter, no contacts. He appealed to various Jewish refugee organizations that did what they could, but it was very little. One day he was arrested for vagrancy and jailed. He remained in the Russian prison in Bialystok for a number of weeks, and then he was released with the admonition that he had better find a job or else.

He set out for the next town, Baramowich, where he sought work again. But his filthy and thread-bare clothing and his disgusting appearance closed all doors to him. He began to beg for food on the streets, which was barely enough to keep him alive. After wandering around Baramowich for the next two months, he decided to return to Bialystok, hoping to plead to the Jewish organizations for some kind of assistance.

Once again he was arrested for vagrancy in Bialystok, only this time he was not released quite so quickly. He shared a cell with several other Polish prisoners. Knowing he had Polish features and fearing for his personal safety, he did not identify himself to them as a Jew. He had already over-

heard their hate-ridden conversations about Jews and did not wish to become the brunt of their anger. With his blond hair and blue eyes he was most convincing as a Christian Pole.

The jail provided him daily with 600 grams of bread and a bowl of soup. It was late in 1940. Prisoners began to be transported to sites up north. As his cell emptied, fresh prisoners replaced his cellmates. He managed to escape each draft to the northern camps, probably because he was just a boy.

One day in 1941 he could hear bombs falling on the city. The explosions were nearing the vicinity of the prison, and rumors spread that the Germans were on the attack and were headed for Bialystok. When the guards decided to flee the prison, they abandoned their prisoners, still locked in their cells. After a day had passed without the daily food ration, the prisoners began to wonder what had happened. A second day passed without food. The prisoners grew more violent and began banging on their bars and cell doors. Their only response was the strengthening sounds of bombs dropping and the German army advancing. They finally concluded that they had been abandoned, and they began to break out of their cells with their collective force. They walked out of the prison and headed down the road.

The sight which met them was that of fleeing Russians with Germans advancing in blitzkrieg fashion. Since all was in chaos, many of the prisoners turned towards the city to loot homes and shops. They invited Chaim to join them, but he refused, since his feet were swollen, his clothes could not keep him warm, and he looked and felt terrible. He chose to sit by a tree and rest. Those cellmates with whom he had struck up friendships promised to bring him back some clothes, as well as kill as many Jews as they could in the city. This group of prisoners was followed by increasingly dan-

gerous groups who had plans of inciting riots and full-fledged looting sprees. These were predominantly Polish.

As he sat on the side of the road, Chaim met Jews who were escaping from the city by any means possible - by foot, horseback, wagon. He begged them for some food, telling them he was Jewish and had just been released from prison. The fleeing masses either ignored him in his despair or cursed and insulted him. Not one person helped him. His prison buddies, however, true to their word, returned with armloads of food, clothing and other necessities. They handed him shoes, pants, shirts, a coat, anything he wished from their booty.

One of the prisoners decided to return to his house in the village. He was a farmer who offered Chaim work. He owned some cows and other livestock, and Chaim could care for the animals in return for food and shelter. The farmer was unaware that Chaim was a Jew. He asked his name, and Chaim answered, "My name is Henry."

For months Henry brought the cows out to pasture, performed other farm chores, and the villager continued to delve into Henry's background. Henry informed him that he came from a town in northern Poland called Poznan. He explained that he spoke German much like the people near Bialystok speak Russian. His host was pleased to have a helper who spoke both German and Russian, particularly because he and others were in the midst of organizing an underground resistance movement and they could use his help.

Until late in the fall there was sufficient animal care to keep Henry busy, but when the winter set in there was no longer a need to bring animals to pasture and care for them. The farmer couldn't keep Henry employed. He did have a friend by the name of Stefan who lived in the neighboring

village, and he devised a plan to introduce Henry to Stefan at the Christmas mass at church. The farmer planned to introduce Henry as a long-lost relative from northern Poland. His friend was a military man attempting to organize a squad of Polish resistance fighters.

The plan was successful, the introductions were made at church during the holiday festivities, and all the white lies about Chaim's background were presented. The villagers already knew that the farmer had picked up his helper, Henry Sarno, from among a group of escaped Polish prisoners. Stefan, nevertheless, was pleased to meet this nineteen-year-old who could prove most useful in skirmishes against the Germans.

The resistance group called themselves the Armyah Krayova or AK, and they organized themselves in 1942 when the German army was already well inside Russia and had left behind units in a guarding capacity. Additionally, they also recruited Ukrainians and Polish sympathizers to guard factories and strategic sites. Local militia were also recruited to volunteer for this maintenance duty for the Germans.

When Henry was recruited to the underground AK, he had to swear on the Bible and the cross that he would be a faithful fighter of the cause, until death. His group already consisted of about seventy-five people, with their numbers growing. They had insufficient ammunition or guns to supply everyone in the unit, however.

One of their early assignments was to attack an outpost of Germans who had secured a transport at the railroad station. They were skilled and fortunate enough to kill a couple of Germans and make away with guns and ammunition, among other things. With that small victory, henceforth they

were an equipped fighting unit.

The more Germans they killed, the more arms and ammunition they acquired. Naturally the Germans concluded that, since the attackers were on foot, they probably originated from within ten kilometers of the targets. As a result, the Germans punished the civilians of the village in retribution for their losses. On one occasion, in revenge for a recent underground attack, they assembled five hundred villagers and shot them en masse, hoping this tactic would discourage future forays of the resistance fighters. This occurred on numerous occasions throughout Poland, yet the numbers of fighters continued to grow and their impact on German outposts became increasingly stronger.

The Germans responded with an increased mobilization of the Ukrainians to replace them as they were transferred to the Russian front. These Ukrainians replaced the Germans at their guardposts, a perfect replacement for the Germans since the vendettas they harbored against Poles were long-standing.

The AK was not always successful, but their successes were sweet. One day they had the assignment of vandalizing or destroying a sawmill which the Germans were rushing to complete in order to produce wood products for bridge and building construction. Workers were organized from nearby towns to complete this project. However, just before the planned opening of the sawmill, the underground group scheduled an attack. They divided their forces so that their attack would come from three directions at once. The project was guarded and overseen by a battalion of Ukrainians and a battalion of Germans. Unbeknownst to them, among their ranks were AK men acting as guards but in fact spies for the resistance fighters. Two of these guards were empowered with opening the main gates of the project. A plan was de-

vised whereby, upon hearing the password, these guards would open the gates to the underground troops.

When the attack occurred, the major guard units were caught asleep, with their pants off. The resistance fighters managed to disarm them and put a torch to the sawmill once and for all. On that night, the group lost a half dozen of their crew. Henry Sarno was among those who survived this and many other dangerous missions.

In 1943, when the Germans began to retreat, numerous assignments were aimed against the Germans, both from the AK and from those Ukrainians who began to disappear from their collaborative roles and formed their own resistance movements. Unfortunately, thanks to the long-standing enmity between them, the Polish partisans were frequently attacked by the Ukrainian partisans. The Ukrainians deserted the Germans when they became disillusioned with their promises of providing them with a free Ukraine. Nevertheless, they harbored their vengeance for the Polish and frequently killed one another, although united against the same enemy.

The AK fighters were hardly any more sympathetic a group, for when they encountered Jews who were trying to save themselves from the Germans, the AK troops shot them down - their enemies also, after all. Those Jews who managed to escape to the woods and forests formed their own resistance groups against 1) the Germans, 2) the Ukrainians, and 3) the Poles. These useless clashes between groups fighting a common enemy was a terrible waste of human life and effort.

Survival among these groups was foremost in their minds. They cut the German supply lines during their retreat in 1944, and those who were sandwiched between the major

forces of the German and Russian armies were helpless at the hands of the resistance fighters. The resistance fighters were well aware of the concentration camps and extermination practices, of gas chambers and evacuation of entire Jewish populations from cities, but their priority was to survive themselves, so they ignored the plight of those unfortunate souls in the camps.

In 1943, when the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto pulled together an uprising against the Germans, they appealed to the AK to assist them on another front to free them from the German terror. The group did nothing, aside from the sale of some arms for which they demanded exorbitant prices. It was obvious that, in principle, they were disinterested in the Jewish uprising in Warsaw.

When, the following year, the Russian army advanced toward Warsaw, the resistance fighters managed to enter Warsaw just before their arrival, with the Russian army standing just at the outskirts of the city, on the far side of the Vistula, just across from the old city. The AK generated their own uprising within Warsaw, while the Russians stood at the sidelines, ready to free all of Poland from the Germans. The AK anticipated that once they began the revolt the Russians would storm the city and assist them.

Henry was with that group in Warsaw, in clear view of the awaiting Russian army and battling the Germans. The Germans used all their military might to squelch the uprising, fearing for their own lives. The Russians, however, never came through, because that particular group of resistance fighters was one of the most hated, thanks to their past cruelties towards Russians, Ukrainians and Jews. The Russians allowed them to be destroyed by the hundreds, some captured as German prisoners-of-war rather than allowing themselves to be killed. Some changed to civilian clothes and

managed to escape to Austria through a trail across the Alps, hoping to reach Italy where the British and Americans had already gained a stronghold. Many were killed or captured in the process.

A small group reached the Italian border near the start of 1945. Chaim signed up with a battalion of Polish troops organized at the second front under Montgomery's command. He used the name Henry Sarno and identified himself as a Polish-born gentile who wished to join Montgomery's efforts against the Germans. In 1945 Chaim was twenty-three years old, had lived through innumerable death-defying adventures, and survived them unscathed.

It took him years to learn what became of his family, sisters, brothers, mother and father. His priority was personal safety.

It was during our search for surviving relatives following the war that I learned that Chaim had managed to escape to Italy and join the Anders army and in 1946 was still attached to the army division in Italy. These troops were gradually discharged from the region, given the option of either returning to Poland or immigrating to England, Canada or Australia, in recognition for their assistance to the British army. The United States was not one of their options. Chaim chose Canada, still registering himself as Henry Sarno.

He traveled to Canada, relocating to a farm where he worked for two years prior to receiving normal citizenship rights.

We made contact with him while he was in Italy. He had also been searching for news of survivors from his family after the war. In 1946, he received the joyous news of his sister Hannah's survival from the concentration camp at

Auschwitz. We were overjoyed to have found SOMEONE from Gittel's family. He later corresponded with us from Canada, recounting his experiences as a laborer. He was thrilled with Canada and working very hard. He worked on a cattle ranch, riding horses and managing the herds, using the skills he had acquired while he was a farm hand in Poland.

In 1946 he met a Canadian farm girl and married her, still concealing his Jewish identity. They had a son. The marriage did not work out, however, and a few years later they divorced. The son stayed with his wife.

When the marriage dissolved, Chaim did not want to remain in Canada and traveled to England, already a Canadian citizen and decorated for his bravery during the war. He married an English woman within a few years. At that time he reestablished his real Jewish name, Chaim Lengalka.

The couple decided to immigrate to Australia, which seemed to hold wonderful prospects for beginning a new life. Chaim's sister Hannah eventually joined them in Australia. They prospered in real estate, his wife loved and helped him, but they had no children. The whereabouts of his son in Canada are unknown.



Chaim Lengalka in 1944 as a Polish soldier



*Chaim Lengalka's Polish military unit after joining Gen. Montgomery's
army in Italy*



Chaim Lengalka in Canada in 1946



Chaim Lengalka in Canada in 1946

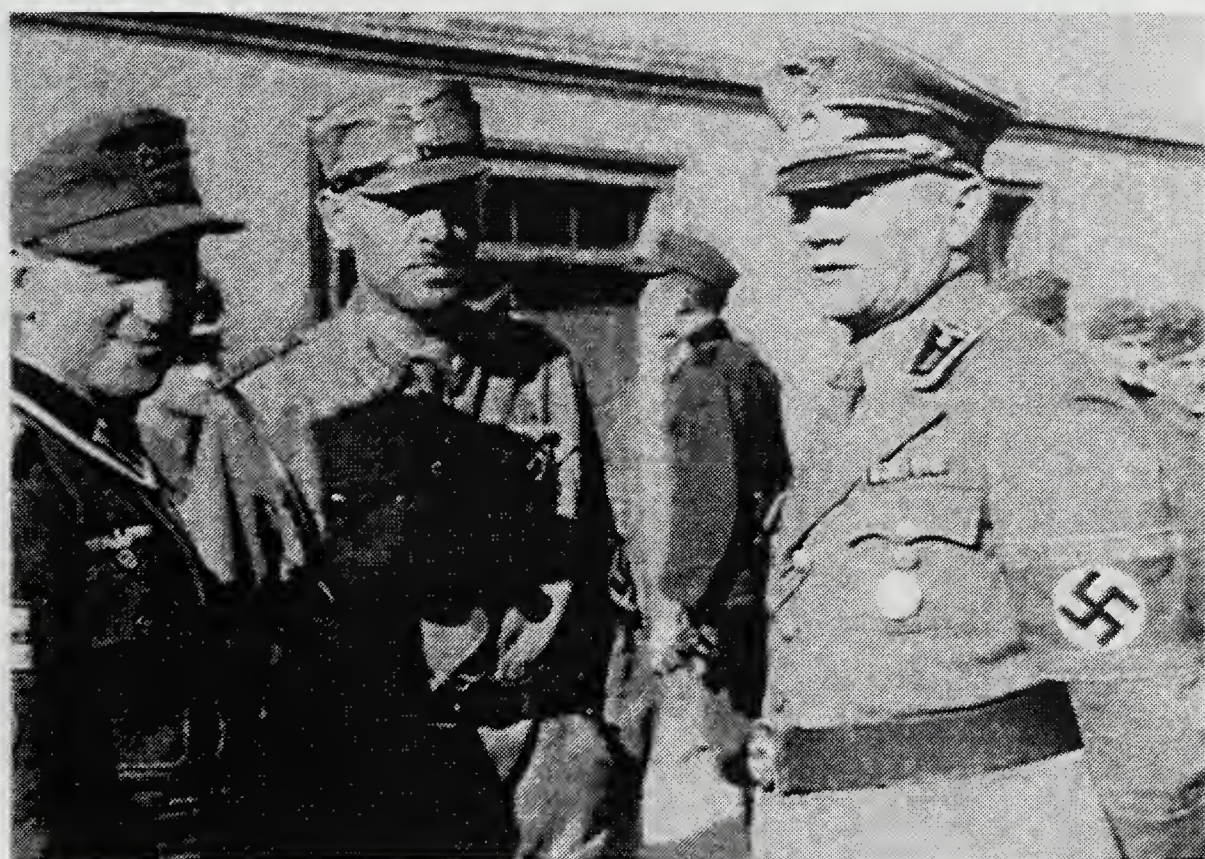
Bella Lengalka's Story

The last cousin we located was Bella Lengalka, Gittel's cousin who was born in July 1915. She is the sole survivor of a family of Lengalka's who lived not far from Gittel's home in Poland. Bella is currently an elderly retiree living in New York City. In Poland, her family was in the shoe business prior to the outbreak of the war.

As the eldest daughter in the family, Bella Lengalka managed to escape to the Russian side when the war broke out in 1939. The rest of the family stayed behind in German-occupied Poland. They, of course, ended up in a concentration camp and were killed in the gas chambers. A chilling reminder of the German cruelties is a photo of Bella's father being hanged which she claims she still carries with her - he was sentenced to this death as his punishment for his daughter escaping after the German-occupied the town. Someone leaked this information to the Germans, and, because of this, the entire family was punished and Bella's father was hanged publicly as a warning to any others with similar ideas.



Hanging of Jews by Nazis



Nazi soldiers



Bella Lengalka serving in the Russian army



Bella Vogel (born Lengalka) as military nurse

She eventually married another Holocaust survivor of the concentration camp in Auschwitz, Victor Vogel, and they lived in New York City all of their married life. He was one of the unfortunate men of Auschwitz who had been castrated by the Nazis for experimental purposes. He passed away in 1990, and, like many who survived the ordeal in Auschwitz, was buried with the prisoner's uniform he still had from those dark days. Bella now lives alone and is in her eighties.

Bella explained to us how she survived the war years on her own. At the beginning she worked on a collective farm in Russia. Later, during 1941-42, she worked on the railroad tracks, repairing the railways. In 1943 she volunteered to serve with the Polish/Russian army, also known as Wanda Wazileski's army. During their travels from Russia to Poland and back, she served as a field nurse on the battle front.

Bella endured great misery during the war, but even when she finally returned to Poland after the war she witnessed more horrors, as vigilantes killed people who had survived the war and returned to their home towns. She was born in Mlawa, the same town where Gittel was born, and, upon her release back to Poland, she returned to that town to a life where at night Jews like her had to barricade their doors and windows because there was constant shooting of those who had returned. She finally decided to flee Poland in 1947, and she managed to reach Paris safely.

In Paris she was so exhausted and traumatized from the hardships of all those wartime and post-war years that she had a complete physical and mental breakdown. She was admitted to a sanitarium where she regained her health, but emotional scars still remained. In 1948 many refugees began begging for permission to enter certain countries, but no one

would take them in. The majority who did manage to leave during those early days only found an open door to Israel. Australia, Canada and other countries eventually allowed immigration, but the United States was the last one, with its long list of restrictions to entry. Our experience is a case in point, where, in 1946, we had legitimate papers from a relative in the United States willing and able to sponsor us to immigrate to the United States, but the bureaucracy caused this process to drag on for five years, until 1951 when we were finally allowed admission. We are forever grateful for that privilege to enter the U.S., but the years of waiting took its toll on all of us, including my wife's cousin Bella.

When she arrived in the United States and settled in New York City, she landed a job as a nurse in the hospitals of New York. There she met and married Victor Vogel and they lived together in the Bronx until his death. During the 1970's Bella was run over by a car and her legs were badly injured, and she has suffered with her legs ever since, but she is so feisty that even that never kept her down.

We were the lucky ones, because we survived to live in a free country. But we also survived with the duty to tell the rest of the world that what we all endured must never be forgotten nor allowed to happen again.

Knowing the story of all these Holocaust survivors reaffirms my belief that one's fate is predetermined, and if it is your fate to survive, you will endure whatever horrors come your way. There is a Hebrew saying: "By force (fate) you are born, by force you live, and by force you die." In other words, everything is predetermined in our lives by some force beyond our understanding.

From DP Camp to DP Camp



The international refugee organization decided that the inhabitants of our camp would have to move again. We were transported in the middle of 1947 to another camp, also in Bavaria, called Gibestadt. This camp was formerly a military base of the German army. My little family was assigned to one room. We stayed in Gibestadt until 1948. We already had papers to go to the U.S. through the sponsorship of the

Uncle, but we had to play the waiting game.

Late in 1947 there was an organized illegal immigration to Israel. Young men and women were being recruited from the camps for this dangerous trip through Italy and to sneak into Israel before the establishment of the state of Israel. Those who had no other options for immigration registered for these trips, but we were more fortunate since we had a paper, a U.S. contact, and merely awaited America's permission for us to immigrate. So when the others left for Israel we stayed behind with a few others. Among those who left for Israel were my sisters, my brother, and their spouses and children, and my mother. I would see only some of them one more time after that, but not my dear sister Pearl who would die from complications during childbirth in Israel.



Gittel with those leaving for Israel, including Pearl and Faiga, Gerzon's sisters



*Friends and family depart for Israel while
Gerzon and family stay behind*



*Farewell to Faiga, Raisa (Pearl's daughter), Dina, Pearl
and her husband Jacob Sandrovich*

In 1948, the German government decided to change the monetary system again. Also at that time following the Russian blockade of Berlin we saw the beginning of the politics of cold war. The U.S. tried to help, through the Marshall plan, to reorganize the German government and economy. With the sudden change in the monetary system, the value of people's savings was drastically cut. According to the new restrictions, each person could only exchange 60 old Deutschemarks for the new currency. We had three people in our household, and we suddenly learned that our money was virtually worthless. We could exchange only 180 new Deutschemarks. I had accumulated some savings over the years through a small photography business which I had organized at the camps. When I heard of the monetary changes, I traveled a few weeks prior to the date and purchased all kinds of photographic equipment from a German factory. I convinced German managers to sell me their equipment with my old currency, and I returned in a taxicab with a load of equipment for my photography business. This helped me to develop later a more efficient operation of my business at the camps.

We were still awaiting final approvals from the U.S. government to travel to the United States, but it took so long and required so much red tape and bureaucratic runaround that we were still there in 1949. That's when the decision was made to close down the camp at Gibstadt so that it could be converted to a military camp. We were again moved to another camp. Those with papers to the U.S. were allowed to stay at the camp in Wurzburg called Centrallager.

This was an international camp with many nationalities represented who were awaiting immigration to the U.S., Canada and Australia. We waited a few months for the final word from the embassy. Nothing happened. I became acquainted with my neighbor in the camp who was also a par-

tisan fighter in the past, a man about my age. His last name was Wels. Whenever we could, we would go to the marketplace in Wurzburg. One day I heard that he had been killed there, lured into a hotel room where his throat was slashed. Even at that time, groups of Nazi sympathizers were springing up everywhere and "doing their duty" whenever possible - continuing to kill Jews. I believe that Wels was a victim of one of those newly organized Nazi groups. However, the German government did not investigate the case. The United States did not make a case about it, either. The reason I suspect the Nazi groups is that I had a similar experience when I was doing business with a photo studio in Wurzburg.

One day in 1949 I walked into a photo studio to buy supplies for my business and there before my eyes in the studio sat a Nazi-uniformed German officer being photographed. I asked the owner, "What's this?" He tried to mitigate the situation, saying that this person just wanted a picture of himself for posterity in his Nazi uniform and that I should forget I ever saw them. I reminded him that this was illegal and the war ended four years ago. I was terribly upset and ran out of the studio. Across the street were two police headquarters, one German and one U.S. army headquarters. I ran into the German headquarters and told them about it. The officer took his time about investigating this incident. He told me to complain to the military establishment next door. So I ran into the military offices and convinced them to go into the studio. By that time, of course, the Nazi was gone and the studio owner denied the incident and it was laughed off as a joke. I strongly believe my neighbor was killed by members of one of these clandestine groups of Nazis who were allowed to continue their despicable practices as they pleased.

The central office for refugees was located in Munich and the group from our camp demanded an investigation

about the Wels death. The group from Munich tried to convince our group that the death was simply a murder which occurred in the course of an ordinary robbery. Had this been true, Wels would have had no possessions left on his person. Yet some of his valuables were still on him when he was found, so the robbery theory is not plausible. Nevertheless, the rabbi on this committee presented the case to the public as a robbery. I will never believe this.



*Camp police at the displaced persons settlement in
Lager Lechweld*

We stayed only a few months at that camp, when a relocation order arrived for us to move to yet another camp called Lager Lechweld. It was the end of 1949. We settled in another little room there and were told to wait again for our orders to come through. By then, the Jewish state had been organized and many were now traveling legally to Israel by ship, first to Italy, then Cyprus, then Israel. Many of my friends followed this route. Those who had papers to go to the U.S. continued to wait. I do not know if politics were involved which extended our displacement and hardship, but when I thought of all the time we lost when I could have been

establishing a business and earning a living, making a home, settling down with my family, and living a normal life, it was very discouraging and depressing.

At each camp I set up a photography business, and I did the same in Lager Lechfeld. My wife, my child Benjamin and I did the best we could. We corresponded with Uncle Jacob in the U.S. and he responded frequently and generously with hope. But my wife Gittel was becoming very impatient and nervous about it and nearly broke down from the strain as well as the nightmares which haunted her. I took her to a doctor in Augsburg who prescribed some medicine to calm her down during these tormenting times.

I continued my work as a photographer and also in 1950 I was sent to cover, as the official photographer of the international refugee association, the unveiling of the memorial at the Dachau concentration camp, an event which was attended by hundreds of survivors and dignitaries. I took on many assignments like this for the UNRA.



Dedication of the memorial at Dachau concentration camp



A Jewish New Year's wish in 1950 from Lager Lechweld

I did not consider myself a survivor, but merely a victim of the German onslaught, the Polish bigotry, the bureaucrats, and politicians who were playing with our lives and holding us out as pawns in international politics. We endured so many hardships for so long, even after the war, yet we had to remain patient. Many people gave up and just went anywhere they could because they were tired of sitting around in the camps waiting for some good news from the refugee organizations which were too slow in responding to their needs.

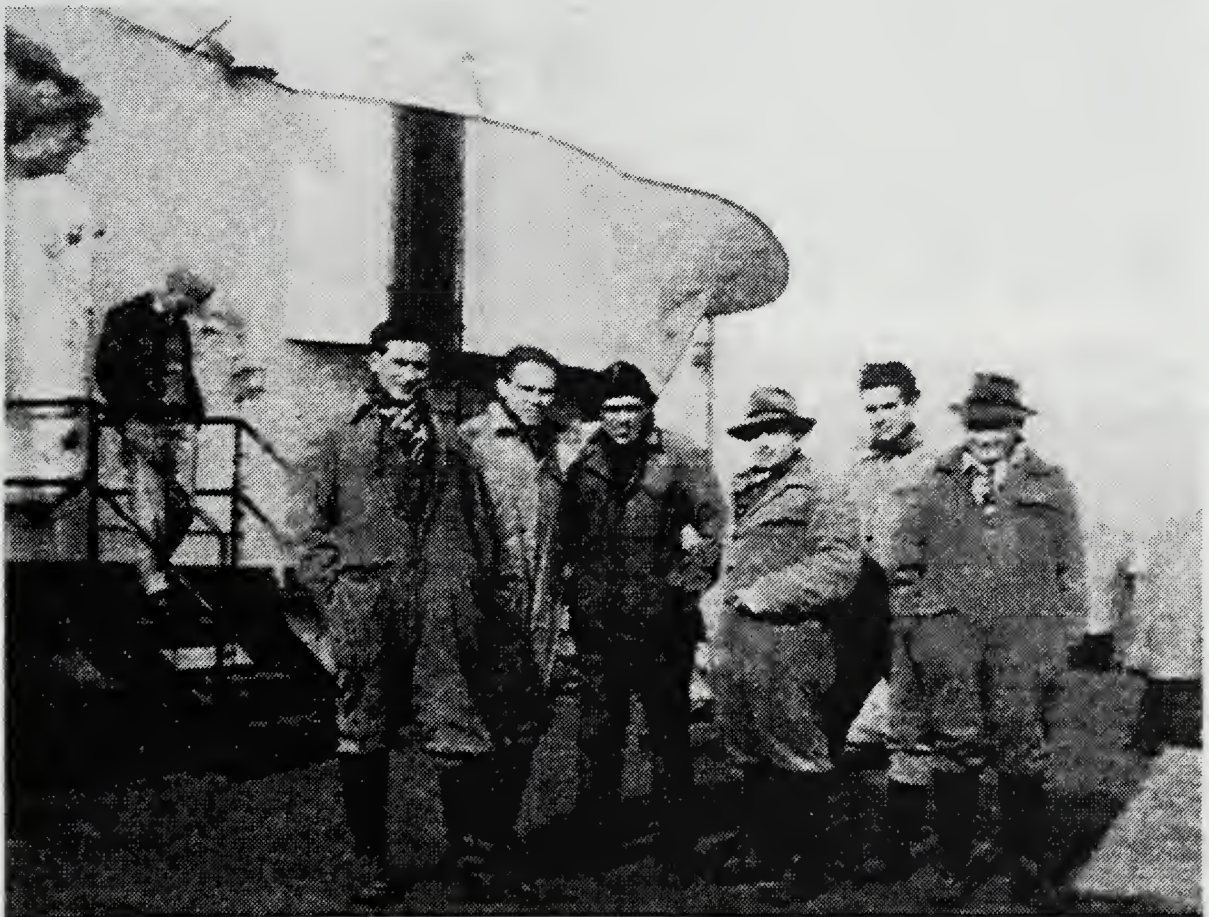
New life emerged at these camps. Some married. Some had children. A second generation was blossoming.

One day I met a girl from my home town who had survived, and I was surprised to see her in Lager Lechweld. She told me her story. Her name was Rifcha Lefkowitz, a young, pretty girl who survived in Russia and managed to escape Poland and the various camps and eventually found her

parents and brother who had also survived. She met a boy at Lager Lechweld who had endured a similar experience and they eventually married. She had a small wedding celebration at the camp in 1950 and we gained a new friendship.

Finally, in the beginning of 1951, we received permission to enter the United States. At the same time we also heard that Lager Lechweld would be dissolved and that all those remaining would be forced to immigrate to Israel. Those who had papers for the U.S., Canada and Australia were again separated to another camp. This camp was in Augsburg, and we were told our stay would be short and we would soon receive our visas.

We were there only briefly, and in March 1951 our visas arrived and we were transported to Hamburg. At long last our waiting had come to an end and we were on a ship on our way to the United States!

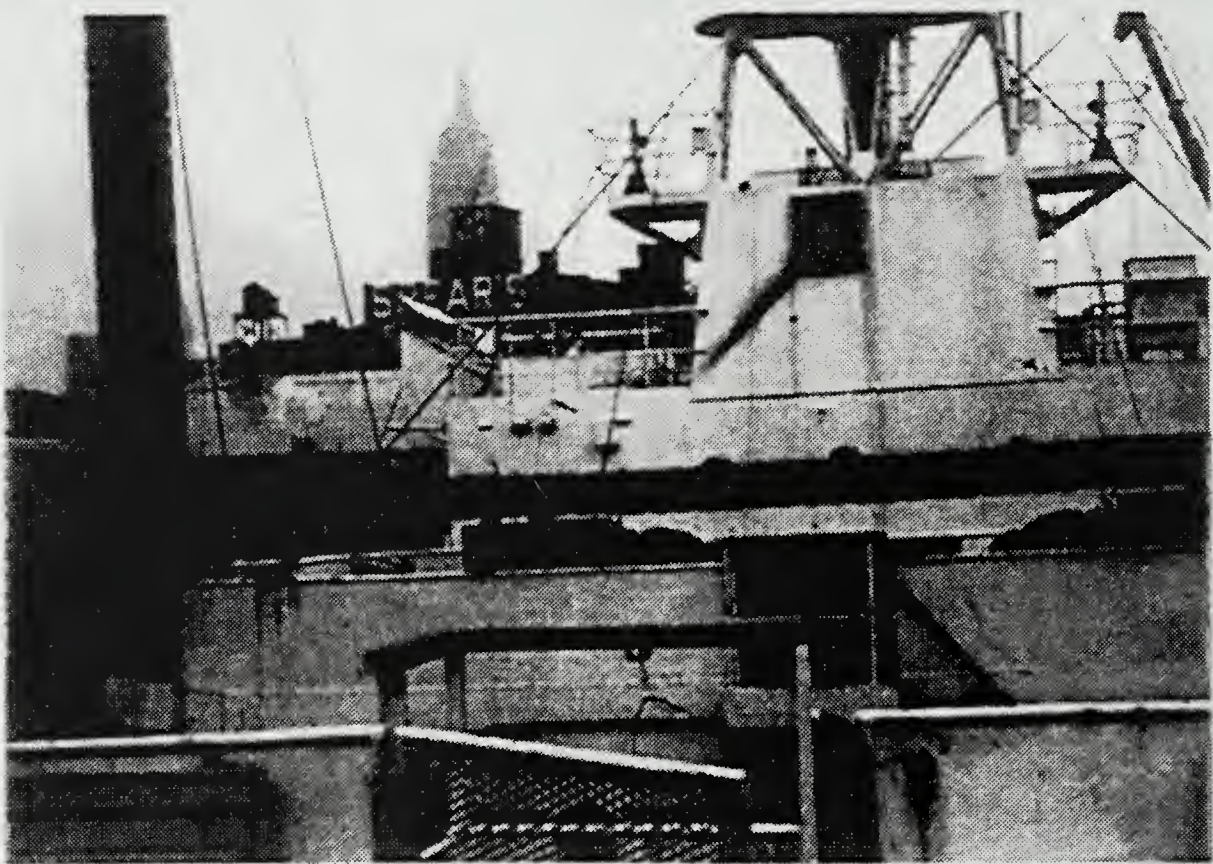


*On the U.S.S. General Muir bound for America
(Gerzon third from the right)*

Chapter 9

Freedom at Last

Our Early Days in America



New York Harbor, New York - 1951

When the U.S.S. General Muir pulled into New York Harbor in 1951, the Statue of Liberty smiled down upon us. Our life was finally beginning after being in limbo for so many years. When we arrived, Uncle Jacob Blank and his eldest son greeted us at the pier in New York. At the hotel after our arrival my cousin Helen Vermont, who lived in New York and whose mother had escaped to the U.S. during World War I, also came to greet us. (Her children are now grown with children of their own, and her husband

passed away in 1996, but Helen lives alone now in a retirement complex in New York.)

As generous as the gesture was, I instantly sensed a chill in the friendliness of the group. Perhaps they feared we would become a burden to them. Perhaps I feared I would become a burden to them.

The Uncle, as we came to call our sponsor, drove us to Boston the next day in his son's station wagon. He welcomed us into his home, showed us our room and introduced us to his younger son, Eddie. He also had other children who had families and households of their own. They were my wife's American cousins - four sons and one daughter. The cousins treated us like intruders, not blood relatives. By then, the Uncle acted warm and accepting of us, though. He understood what we had been through and tried his best to soothe the friction caused by his wife and children.

The family ran a large business establishment which specialized in plastics. They owned a four-story building and employed many workers. The following day, the Uncle took me to the factory which his sons and he owned and operated, Jacob Blank and Co. The Uncle himself was a stockholder and employee there. Not far from there, he also owned and operated a parking lot near the Boston Garden. He showed me his businesses and described his rise to prosperity, beginning with a humble shoe store, surviving the Depression, raising his family. He also said he would try to get me a job in the factory.

He introduced me to people there at the plant and he proudly told one and all that he sponsored us. We entered the office of the busy executive Arthur Blank, the president of the company, and workers were hustling and bustling around the plant and office. Frankly, Arthur was not too thrilled with

my arrival and not very pleased about having to give me a job. They spoke in English, but I could understand clearly that he refused to hire me. The Uncle apologetically explained that he would approach some of his business contacts to find me a job elsewhere.

I said, "I'm a photographer. I would like to work in my trade." He said that photographers would not hire me until I mastered the English language, and suggested I start working in a factory and see what evolves. So, I agreed to visit a few factories which he took me to, and spoke with the owners, but, after a half day's search on my behalf, we came back empty-handed.

When we returned to the plastics factory, his son, upon hearing the Uncle's report, scolded his father for wasting his time with a greenhorn like me when he was needed at the factory. I overheard the argument and saw that the Uncle was distressed, but he did not make a scene by talking back to his son. He apologetically explained to me that I would have to wait there while he worked until the end of the day and we would return home together. I did not know how to get home on my own, since it required buses and streetcars, so I waited until he finished his stint at the parking lot. I had no other choice, but I was aware of the conflicts I was causing. Inside I was hurt, but I did not show it. I was disappointed, too. I had been in the U.S. three days and had no real prospects.

The following day the Uncle said to me that he would try to find me a job at other places in Boston. I said, no, I did not wish to waste anyone's time, and convinced him to go to work without me. I took the streetcar, asked directions, and made my way into Boston by myself. I knew very little English, but combed Washington Street in downtown Boston in search of photo studios and photographic shops. I came upon

a small photo studio at 671 Washington Street, Van Dyke Studio, which specialized in portraits and photography for special occasions. I walked in and met the proprietor, David Landau. I managed to explain my situation: I was nearly 28 years old, able to develop pictures, shoot photographs, retouch - anything photographic - and willing to work for him immediately. He needed a retoucher of negatives and needed these quickly and on-site in his darkroom. He tested my skills on a few negatives and agreed to hire me on probation for one week. He informed me that the minimum wage was 75 cents per hour, but he would pay me \$1 per hour. I agreed.

On my return home, I proudly told my wife I had found a job at \$40 per week. She was very happy, particularly because I was able to accomplish this without anyone's help. The Uncle was pleased, too, and probably relieved. Nevertheless, there was still the burden of our living in his house. I noticed that his wife was not exactly delighted to have a strange couple and their five-year-old son in their household in Mattapan, but they had no choice since they did not want to kick us out either. The tension grew.

Their son Eddie occasionally stayed over at their house, but seemed annoyed by the imposition, too. He was about twenty years old and employed as a television repairman, I believe. He was fairly friendly, though, and even occasionally took my son, Ben, to the zoo, and on walks along Blue Hill Avenue, and he showed a little sympathy for us. The rest of the Blank family, though, behaved very distant and apprehensive about our presence. At any rate, they had their own busy lives to lead.

After one week of employment, I looked around for any better photo companies. Someone mentioned that a place on Boylston Street involved in mass production and photo finishing services was looking for photographers. At

day's end I walked over there and looked up A & L's Photo Finishing. Abramson was the proprietor. A group of people worked there on the various stages of photographic production. I explained that I was a professional photographer seeking steady employment. This was a mom and pop operation at the peak of its busy season. They said I could work either on salary or based on piecework. I could earn \$60 per week there, which was better than my current pay, so I accepted this job.

The following day I informed my first employer that I was moving on. My new employer promised to provide benefits as well as a weekly \$5 raise if I worked out. He also mentioned that he had closed up a studio, Franklin Field Studio, which I could operate as my own if I paid him a fee. He thought that based on my past experience in Germany as the owner of a photography business I would be an ideal candidate to reopen the shop. What I found was a dump of old equipment needing extensive repair. The rent would be \$75 per month. I said I was not interested and suggested he sell off his old useless equipment. I did stay on with his company, though.

I could not speak English very well at that time, but I was learning fast. I attended night courses to pick up more English. During the weekends I searched for an apartment for my family. I soon found a three-room apartment with a kitchen on Erie Street in Roxbury. The rent was very reasonable at \$75 per month. We moved in as soon as I could afford it after a couple more weeks of wages.

Being on our own was a blessing for our family. It was still difficult to make ends meet with all the expenses of a new life. My wages were up to \$75 per week, minus deductions. One Friday afternoon I received my check after the banks had closed. I needed cash and asked my co-workers

where I could cash my check. They told me it was too late to cash my check. I asked the owner, Abramson, if he could help me out and cash my check. He refused. My wife would have no money for groceries, I explained, but he turned a deaf ear. This angered me, in addition to the fact that I had learned that all those previous months I had been working overtime I did not receive time and a half pay, while all the other employees did. When I confronted him with this complaint that I was being discriminated against because I was a foreigner, he responded that I was hired as a salaried employee and it was my own decision to work overtime. I told him it was morally wrong to pay me differently from everyone else. I resolved to look for another job at one of his competitors. It was amazing to me that this owner, a fellow Jew, would take advantage of me and my naivete.

My English was improving and I had made many more contacts, so that Saturday I looked for a new job. One studio, Van Tine Studio on Boylston Street, tested my retouching skills. The proprietor offered me piecework at 50 cents per head which, at 5 or 6 per hour, would potentially translate to over \$100 per week, he said. I tested his theory, and found that the best anyone could do was 3 or 4 heads per hour, or \$1.50 per hour. He gave me the large negatives, too, which required more work. I inquired about the smaller negatives and he said he paid 25 cents per head. Later that day I learned that he paid his other employees \$1 per head for the larger negatives and 50 cents per head for the smaller ones. So, he, too, was taking advantage of me and trying to cheat me. After the half-day test I turned down his offer.

Near Congress Street not far from Scollay Square was a large photographic lab which was not run by Jewish owners, called Jim Easy's Place. At Jim Easy's Place there were several retouchers working at their stands. A little Italian man, Frank, was the supervisor. I spoke to him in my bro-

ken English and he responded that they did need retouchers very badly. I could work piecework on the small negatives and even take some home to earn more money, at a rate of 40 cents per head. I calculated that I could make more money on piecework than before, so I accepted the job and remained there for about six months, earning first \$100 and eventually \$150 per week. This covered our living expenses satisfactorily.

My wife became pregnant with our second child, so we needed more money. I looked for an extra job through a Jewish organization on Franklin Street - a night shift position. I explained that we needed the extra money due to the new addition to the family. They referred me to the Cable Raincoat Company to work from 6:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. This would be piecework in raincoat manufacturing.

I became acquainted with my workmates, many of whom were immigrants, too. Although I was already tired out by my schedule of holding down two jobs. I also began to establish a photographic business out of our Erie Street apartment. I built an outdoor showcase and converted one room into a studio. I did the photo finishing at the company and reimbursed them for that. My photographic business became more lucrative but I was growing increasingly exhausted from the two jobs, so I dropped the night job.

During the winter of 1952 when the photography business slowed down and less work was available at the factory, I started to think about another job. By now I had many contacts. I knew of a place on Bromfield Street involved in the same business which was run by a husband and wife, called New England Professional Photography Finishing. The owner interviewed me and hired me at \$75 per week, with additional overtime at time and a half, and vacation. I gave my notice at Jim Easy's and began working for Mrs. Ef-

fron.

She was pleasant to work for and made me “all around man” at the place, performing the whole range of photographic services. She also gave me a \$5 raise to \$80 per week after three months. It was a steady job, regardless of the season.

Growing Professionally

In the end of March, 1952 my second child, Shirley, was born. The apartment on Erie Street was definitely too small for a couple with two children and a studio, too. I found a six-room apartment at 1015 Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester for \$75 per month with a two-year lease. It was a lively location, not far from Franklin Field, the G & G Delicatessen, which was a popular restaurant, and always lots of people walking along the avenue. I mounted a showcase of my work near the front of the house, and I set up a studio in the front rooms of the apartment. My wife stayed busy with our two children and the household. I was consumed by my business and two jobs.

After we moved into 1015 Blue Hill Avenue, I started to organize my own business and my wife became pregnant again. I said to her that this time I was going to quit all the odd jobs and run my own business. Up until then I was working at a number of photographic companies. My wife strongly opposed my quitting the jobs, and this caused a lot of turmoil at home. I told the Uncle about my plans and he supported me and encouraged the idea. My wife was still against it, arguing that it was too risky with a family of two children and another on the way. I was stubborn, though, and I asked the Uncle if he could help me financially. He stood there looking deep into my eyes, pondered my request, and

then asked me how much I would need. I answered that I would need at least \$1,000 to start the business.

We started discussing the specifics and haggling, and he proposed the following idea: he would establish a pass-book savings account in his own name at the Blue Hills Credit Union, and I would deposit \$10 into it and he would deposit \$800. Then I would deposit payments once the business made money, and once the account returned to the \$800 level we would be even. I agreed. This would just be a loan under these terms.

I had to buy equipment to supplement what I had already brought from Germany. I purchased some photo lab equipment, made a studio out of our parlor, and organized a darkroom in one of the bedrooms of our apartment. I accepted jobs from other photographers when they had an overload of work and needed a skilled photographer to meet their deadlines. I generated my own jobs, too.

I became acquainted with a photographer from Peabody, Bob Sweeney, a single guy who had established a studio in his father's house. He needed somebody to develop his pictures and produce top quality photos for his customers. He liked my work and we also became friends. He had a girlfriend who was a nurse in a state hospital in Dorchester, a very beautiful woman whose name was Caroline. So, every time he came to Dorchester to visit her, he stopped by and brought me some work.

Bob also had some extra professional equipment that he wasn't using, and he lent this to me with the understanding that when I had the money I would purchase it outright. I welcomed this offer, but the agreement also stipulated that in return for using and purchasing his equipment, I would also have his continued business. He agreed. So, any time he was

in a jam and needed people to shoot weddings during the weekends, I helped him out and he paid me for this, too. For the young business that I had, this was a good deal, since I had at least one regular account I could depend upon for income in addition to my own customers.

The business slowly took off. Then my second daughter, Helen, was born in June of 1953, so I had a family of three children, my wife was caring for them at home, and I worked in my studio. This situation would continue for a few years.

Meanwhile, Uncle Jacob's wife, Sarah, became ill with arthritis and in early 1954 the Uncle decided to sell his house and move to Arizona. When my second daughter was born, the Uncle's side of the family didn't even come to visit us because they were wrapped up in their own busy lives and had become rather distant and cold relatives to my wife. At first, they had been only slightly aloof, but as time went on they became less and less available to Gittel and our family. They only visited our home once since Shirley was born in 1952 when they were invited to her first birthday party, but they never came around after that.

The Uncle remained a presence in our lives, though. One day during the summer of 1953, he took us to Revere Beach and we stayed with him at a resort at the beach. At that time I didn't have a car or a license, but I was taking classes at a driving school that was run by his daughter Rita's husband, a man by the name of Rosen. Rita's husband had a partner by the name of Doug, a friendly and gracious man. Rita eventually divorced Rosen and married Doug. The driving school was in Roxbury Crossing. Driving a car was very important to me, but I had to learn the language, run my business, and also go to driving school. Needless to say, I rarely had a free moment myself.

Driving classes lasted a few months, I paid for all my lessons, and finally I knew how to drive. By 1954 I had my license and could drive on my own.

When Helen was born, we communicated with a long-lost cousin of Gittel's, Bella Lengalka, who was in New York and learned that Gittel was living in Dorchester, so she came to visit us in 1954 when my daughter Helen was only an infant. Since I didn't have a car of my own, I rented a car to pick up Bella at the bus station in Boston and take her home to stay with us for a couple of weeks. Shirley was only about a year and a half old at that time. Ben was a big boy by then, about eight years old, and attending public and Hebrew schools.

That summer of 1954 we heard the news that the Uncle was selling his house and moving to Arizona by summer's end. This was on the advice of a doctor that his wife would do better in a drier climate. So, he was busily packing and we didn't see him much, either. He never sent any gifts for the children, probably because he felt he had done enough just by setting up the \$800 bank account. Still, Gittel was very hurt by the Uncle's lack of involvement with her family and the fact that our family was being snubbed by his children. She said he was the image of her own father, whom she missed deeply, but he was too busy to be a father to her.

The Uncle had promised that when he sold his house he would give us his refrigerator which he could not sell because it was too old. We would truly have appreciated it because we had a very old one that was too small. But, when moving day was at hand, he informed us that his son Eddie was taking the refrigerator instead. My wife was furious that he had broken his promise, and she made a scene in front of him. When he left for Arizona, she wouldn't even go to bid

him farewell because she was so angry. She had felt somehow betrayed after he had made a big announcement to his family about his generosity in giving Gittel the refrigerator, and then he reneged.

After the Uncle moved to Arizona, he continued to write to us, but his children ceased any further contact with us. I was too busy with my business to worry about it, but Gittel was insulted by their actions and took it very hard, and she remained angry at the whole family. She felt her American relatives were treating us like pariahs, not like blood relatives but like strangers. We were treated better by people who were complete strangers who tried to help us with our struggling business and growing family, than by our own flesh and blood!

There was a fireman in Hyde Park and another fireman in Dorchester who did some photography on the side. One was named Keith, a Christian fellow who was nice to me and whom I helped, too. David Johnson was the other one. I gave them advice about earning extra money in photography to supplement their fireman's pay.

There were Christians in our neighborhood, but mostly we were in a very large Jewish community. The Christians had little or nothing to do with our community of immigrants the first few years. They called us "Greenhorns."

Surprisingly, there was also no sympathy at all, particularly businesswise, from the Jewish community. There was one place in the Grove Hall section of Dorchester called Emporium Plaza, which was a function hall. I had an assignment to cover a wedding there with black and white photography. The Jewish owners and even the rabbi who performed the ceremony were so unfriendly to me and I had no idea why. During the wedding I asked if I could shoot some pic-

tures, even timed shots without flash, which would be noticeable to no one, but they refused to allow me to or to cooperate with me when I was supposed to be taking pictures, making it practically impossible for me to work. Even my explanations and pleadings about my predicament didn't arouse their sympathy. When I sneaked one non-flash shot from afar, the rabbi shouted at me from the altar that he would have me thrown out and report me to the authorities. He insulted and humiliated me. I'll never forget how hard it was to become accepted in America.

As years passed, the business developed and some American-born photographers heard about me and my reputation and sought me out for help and advice. Even my competitors who were right on the same avenue, including Ashton Studios, knew how to shoot pictures but could not process, reproduce and retouch them like I did, and they called on me. I took on the work because I could always use the extra income. So, I became more and more in demand, and my business advanced.

In 1955, after a few years in business, I started experimenting with various ways to make my job easier and improve photographic techniques and quality. I came up with some innovative methods for the photography services I performed. Major companies found out about what I was doing and they contacted me. Even large photography studios, like Fay Photo which had a huge commercial photography business, approached me to learn about the methods I was using for color photography, which was new at the time but an area in which I had already been dabbling. Everyone was transitioning from black and white to color photography.

I worked on a number of inventions but had not yet perfected any of them. I recall that at the same time the telephone companies were switching over to princess phones

with different colors. They gave their commercial photography contracts to Fay Photo and other large companies, but those studios were not yet expert in color photography, so they asked me for my advice on this project. Word had spread that I was on the verge of a new method for color photography, so Fay sent me color slides and transparencies to convert into prints.

Even Eastman Kodak did not have at that time an efficient system for color prints photography, beyond the old, very expensive methods which were not economically feasible. I was perfecting my processes and inventions, and I did a few jobs for those big companies. Eastman Kodak then sent their agents to see what I was doing. They encouraged me to keep up the good work and keep them informed of my progress. I wrote to them and proposed to them that they work with me, but stipulated that I expected some compensation in return. At that point they backed off, perhaps because they felt I was too small a company to do business with, or maybe they were on their way to something of their own by then. Still, they were very curious about my progress, and I had visitors on a number of occasions who included sales representatives from Eastman Kodak's new products division. I only recall the name of one of their representatives, Fred Church. He became very friendly with me. I willingly shared my knowledge with all comers. I never received any remuneration for my help, though.

I also joined a number of professional associations, including the Massachusetts and New England Professional Photographers Associations. I thought that this was how things were done in America. People also advised me to obtain patents through a patent attorney to protect all my inventions and ideas. I contacted one in Boston by the name of Harold Cole, and I gave him all the information, documentation, sketches and the like, pertaining to inventions and

ideas, and he helped me file for patents.

Through all these contacts and acquaintances who sought my services, my business continued to grow. One photographer from Milford, a Portuguese man and his wife, became very good friends with our family. He had a photography business out of his house and garage, and he used my photographic services. His name was Gerry Perry, owner of Perry's Studio. He had noticed in the work that he had given me that my products were far superior to anyone else's, and he learned that it was due to my inventions. Since my inventions required more capital investment, and he liked what he saw, he asked to go in as a partner in marketing my inventions.

I had already built a prototype sophisticated lighting unit and had been using it for my photography, but it was a very rough prototype. To market it, I needed the services of electronics technicians and machinists for the various components. In Watertown I found a manufacturer of electronics products, and proposed we join forces to build and market the unit. I finally convinced them, and when I took in Gerry Perry as a partner and he invested a couple thousand dollars in the project, we all agreed to move forward with the manufacture and royalty agreement for the product.

I had to pay \$400 for producing the first unit according to my specifications, which included a special lighting system which would enhance color photography, and I signed a royalty agreement that specified that I would receive 10% of all the sales. The company's name was HYCO Manufacturing Corporation. They already had a portable lighting unit which was being used by amateurs and professionals for strobe flash photos, so my product was a good fit with their line of products.

I had also contacted the creator of a flash photo cube, an inventor from Germanhauser and Greyer in Boston who had invented an underwater flash. They wanted to know more about my invention, but nothing came out of it when they felt that they could do their own research and development with their own engineers. I also contacted Eastman Kodak about ways in which I could be helpful in developing more advanced color photography techniques, but I always received polite refusals with suggestions that I contact smaller companies instead of them. I also approached enlarging machine companies like Simmon Omega and Bessler, describing to them how my inventions could improve the photographic field. My overtures were either ignored or people simply answered politely that they were not interested. In retrospect, I believe I gave too much detail with the information I freely provided, and companies could then proceed on their own using MY ideas but never having to acknowledge me as a source of their innovations.



Gerzon with one of his inventions

Business continued to grow slowly, and I decided to expand because I needed more room. In 1957, after I became an American citizen, I looked into renting a store across the street from my residence, on Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester. I had close relationships with many photographers that requested my services and found me indispensable. I even received calls from photographers from other states includ-

ing Oregon, Ohio and Michigan, because they had heard of me through an industrial magazine, PMI, that had a large circulation in the U.S. and Canada, where I had published a one-column ad with a photograph of my prototype in it.

My patent lawyer wrote a letter to the National Photographers Association of America with a column about my advances in technical photography, but they did not publish anything about it, even though I was a dues-paying member of that organization. They just dismissed my ideas as unimportant or inconsequential.

I do believe that the larger companies who had contacted me did steal my ideas, and just made slight changes to them for their purposes and products. The patent office took incredibly long in granting my patent, and they challenged my patent request at first on the grounds that certain components of my invention may be already patented; but my claim was that my system was a totally new product and application using many existing components and some of my own, too, for photographic improvements. My patent lawyer, himself, felt that there was some kind of conspiracy going on probably originating from the large photographic companies, to delay my patents while they moved forward with their product development. I maintained the patent pending status and continued to respond to the questions posed by the patent office.

Meanwhile, the manufacturing deal was also stalled, and my plans and parts were just lying around in that company with whom I had signed the marketing agreement. Everything on that front was at a virtual standstill. I later discovered that HYCO Corporation was selling a product amazingly similar to mine, so I sued them for stealing my ideas. It took many years, but eventually I did win the law suit. It was no great windfall victory, though, since the pro-

ceeds ended up mostly in the pockets of my lawyers. In any case, it was an education for me to learn about the American business system.

In 1956 I became an American citizen. I also persevered in growing my own business and making my own inventions in photography. In 1957 my wife announced she was pregnant again, and in November 1958 our fourth child, Leonard, was born.

I decided the time had come to expand the business and signed a lease for a vacant store just across Blue Hill Avenue from my home. I made some calculations and discussed this with my friend Gerry Perry, and we decided to open that storefront together for a second business in photography. I invested some money into building an office in the back, installed a darkroom and studio area, and I took in some part-time help. The business grew a little more. I also maintained my business out of my home.

I contacted numerous photographic organizations to announce my advances in photographic technology using my inventions. I wanted to show my inventions at the New England Photographers Convention. In 1957 I prepared a demonstration of my product in Swampscott, Massachusetts. I did this in addition to working daily from early morning until near midnight with my regular business. I was busy, which was a good thing, but I had no time for myself. There were no vacations, no weekends. It was a very difficult life, but to advance in business you have to work hard every day of the week, which I did without a complaint.

Let's Get Together

All along I encountered many newcomers like me,

refugees who came from the camps to the United States. Some I knew and some I did not know, but we saw each other in the neighborhood and became acquainted. Some came into my studio and I got to know them better. Around that time I met a man by the name of Israel Arbeiter and his family. He dropped by my studio, we began to talk, and we concluded that something should be done for the newcomers who arrived in the 1950's and before. I suggested we establish an organization of Holocaust survivors from the refugees who recently arrived in the Greater Boston area. He thought this was a great idea since some were already regularly getting together socially and playing ball in the parks. I said that this was not enough, and believed that an official organization should be formed. He agreed.

So, we held a meeting in my new studio on Blue Hill Avenue, in the office area. The meeting had to be held after 7:00 p.m. because I was conducting business during the day. We scheduled 8:00 p.m. meetings a couple nights a week and formed a small organizational committee.

I encouraged the group to organize formally and legally. First, we formed a committee from among those we identified on a membership list of people who shared our experiences and background and anyone else willing to take part in our organization. I made up that list, and my son Benjamin, who was assisting me in my studio part-time and could type, transcribed our ideas and lists and minutes. We then showed the plan to the committee, and everyone agreed with the proposal. I also suggested we write a constitution and obtain the services of a lawyer to help us with this. We looked for contacts from among our group. We decided that dues would be \$5 per year for membership, and the membership would attend regularly scheduled meetings, would have voting privileges, and meetings would be conducted based on a democratic system.



George and Gertrude Gerzon circa 1958

The word spread about what we were doing, and more and more families joined the club. We had a dance and a dinner party in a rented hall. Eventually we had a membership of around 400 families. The communities of Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan and other Boston neighborhoods were beginning to hear about us. However, there were Jewish organizations who were not pleased with our activities. They frowned upon our existence and said that they had so many organizations of their own, and we should join theirs. Arbeiter and I explained to them that anyone from our group who wished to join their organizations could still do so, but we wanted to maintain ours because as survivors of the war we had similar experiences and problems which they could not understand but we as a group could share with one other because we had so much in common. Our past and present experiences bonded us in our new organization. In spite of the opposition from the various established Jewish groups, our organization of immigrants thrived.

At one point we sent a delegation of the Executive Committee (myself included) to the office of the Mayor of Boston. We presented a petition to Mayor Collins explaining that we were an organization of Greater Boston's Holocaust survivors, but we did not have a place to meet. We rotated the sites of our meetings from among the businesses and homes of various members. We noticed that there were so many vacant buildings around Boston that belonged to the city, and we requested a space of our own, if possible, from the city. The Mayor of Boston rejected our request. Collins was sarcastic and laughed us off, saying the city was unable to give us anything or assist us in any way. This came from the head of a city who, in later years, would try to organize during the 1980's a multi-million-dollar memorial to the six million Jews who perished during World War II. In reality, when we needed it the government of Boston did not help us one bit.

Occasionally, temples or civic groups let us rent a space for a function, but that proved very costly. Not one organization, however, was ever very sympathetic or charitable. Some even made threatening phone calls to me and other members of our group. We suspected it came from those fanatical groups that did not like the idea of our being organized at all. In fact, as the years went on, those threats became more frequent.

Once a year we managed to persuade a temple to host a memorial service for survivors to honor the victims of the Holocaust and also for the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. One temple on Woodrow Avenue allowed us to do this at their site, so this became an annual event.

As threats became more frequent, I suggested we form a non-profit corporation, so that none of the individual members would be held liable for our actions as a group. A generous lawyer, Harold Katz, a friend of Arbeiter's, was sympathetic to our activities. A senator, Frank Foster, was also very encouraging of our organization, and he spoke to our group on a few occasions as an invited speaker. He applauded our progress.

Harold Katz pulled together free of charge the incorporation materials for our group. Finally we became a legal entity, the New Americans Association of Greater Boston.



*The Executive Committee of the Greater Boston New Americans Association:
Israel Arbeiter in the center of row one; Gerzon, back row, last person on the right*

“Fired” from Boston

In 1963 a fire erupted in the cellar of the grocery store that abutted my studio on Blue Hill Avenue. At first, the store workers tried controlling the fire themselves, so when the fire department finally arrived, the fire was completely out of control. The entire city block of stores burned down. Over the next days I rummaged through the rubble for anything that could be salvaged, but I could see that not much was useful.

When my studio and business were destroyed in the fire, I approached the city government for assistance in reestablishing my business. Instead of assistance I was handed a business property tax bill. At that time, when my business burned down and I could not conduct business for at least six months and had no financial support from anyone, I learned the painful reality that again I could only depend on myself. The Jewish community did not help. Our family's relatives did not help. It seemed that it was all up to ourselves to survive this new tragedy.

Thankfully, some of our new American friends did come forward to help. I recall that those two firemen that I used to help out in their sideline photography business came forward and lent me some old equipment they had.

When we finally collected the insurance settlement, we used the proceeds to move to Canton, Massachusetts and I established a new business there. It was a tremendous financial struggle with a wife and four children to support, the eldest only 15 years old. The mortgage and taxes had to be paid, as well as all the expenses of a family with young children. How ironic that among the first people to approach me was a delegation of representatives from the temple, an-

nouncing that they were building a new synagogue, and trying to convince me how helpful it would be if I would make a donation toward the building. They had no concern for my plight, they just wanted a building pledge. I explained that I was trying to organize a business, I was struggling myself to support a family of six, and I didn't even make a week's pay yet. They argued that if I joined the temple they perhaps could do something to help the family, and they cajoled me into signing up for a \$500 building pledge. They pointed out that I needed to join the temple so that my young children could be properly educated in our faith, at an additional cost of \$300 per year. They sold me a bill of goods and I wasn't even earning money yet!

Of all the new acquaintances I made in Canton, non-Jews proved to be more sympathetic than the Jewish community. I considered the latter group a bunch of hypocrites and I will never forget how unsympathetically they treated me and my family over the ensuing years.

Some members of our Holocaust survivor group steered business my way. As the years passed, I rebuilt my company, but only through hard work and long hours, because, in the end, I never wanted charity from anyone, including the government, even when I needed it badly. Those organizations who were supposed to help out small businesses always found a way to refuse me anyway.

Staying in business was a constant struggle. Establishing oneself as the town's photographer is an uphill battle, built on years of approval by customers and their recommendations to others. But when I was finally in line to bid on a contract for the high school yearbook photography in my town, a \$20,000 annual business, I learned an important lesson about small-town politics and kick-backs. For years the school photography contract was not even open for bidding

and I was never given a chance to vie for the contract. I eventually learned that the larger companies had been kicking back 10% in special deals with the school officials. I felt I was taxed enough on my income and property without having to pay an additional "tax" to the town for the privilege of doing business with them. I called it double taxation and illegal. My prices were lower and my quality better, but I was not allowed to have the contract. I called it immoral to have to bribe the school department to win the contract. It ended up in a confrontation with the school committee, but I never got anywhere with them. I contended that business should be based on the quality and value for the services. I just wanted to be given a fair chance by my own community. The school committee politely explained to me that this was how business was done. I even wrote to small business organizations for support, but I was given the cold shoulder by them, too.

But some personal friends didn't let me down and stuck with me through thick and thin, and, thanks to my reputation for top quality photography, my business thrived, even without the school contract.

Beyond 1963

When we moved to Canton we could read the financial writing on the wall, and we knew it would be impossible to make ends meet on my earnings alone, so my wife took a job to help out. She worked at the Massachusetts Hospital School for a few weeks, but she couldn't stay there because she found herself becoming emotionally attached to the patients - handicapped children who lived at the Hospital School. She soon was hired by Morse Shoe Company in Canton. At first she worked for only 75 cents per hour, and later for \$1.00 per hour. She didn't earn much, but we were struggling and every little bit helped.

The children attended the Canton public schools. Benjamin graduated from Canton High School in 1965 and then enrolled in a technological institute to become a draftsman. When he completed the program, he was employed in a Boston engineering company for a while, and then The Foxboro Company.

Shirley, Helen and Leonard attended the Canton Schools, some religious school at the Temple, and Leonard completed Hebrew school.

In 1967 Benjamin enlisted in the Marine Corps and was shipped off to Vietnam. He returned safely from Vietnam, after bravely serving his country. He fought in Vietnam for a full year, mostly as a radio operator in the jungles near Da Nang, and was honorably discharged upon completion, having earned the rank of sergeant.



*The Gerzons circa 1967 (from front to back, left to right):
Benjamin, Gertrude, Leonard, Helen, George and Shirley*

These were trying times, but my wife and I made the best of them. The days passed quickly and time never stood still. Soon Shirley graduated high school and started college at Northeastern University and became a nurse. Then Helen graduated and left for Simmons College and became a teacher. Then Ben moved off to California and became an engineer. Leonard graduated high school and then Brandeis University and became a property tax expert for New Hampshire's largest electric utility.

I was usually too busy with my business to attend many of my children's programs or plays. I did the best I could and just tried to keep up with the bills that kept piling up every month. I took on wedding jobs and other photographic assignments, made portraits in my studio, did all the developing, retouching processing, and photo finishing for my photography business. Needless to say, I could not attend most of the school games and performances my children participated in. I was just barely keeping up with life's daily responsibilities. As I look back now, I think of the times I could have spent with the children that I didn't. Still, I made some time occasionally to take them out to the beaches when they were small, and I often recorded their important events for movies, and, naturally, I took lots of pictures of them. But time passed so quickly. Well, you can't bring it back and be miserable about what you could have done differently. This was the best that I could do at the time.

Now as I sit here in my new home at 1688 Washington Street in Canton, where we've lived for more than four years, I think about the past and it's like a dream drifting by. I don't have any regrets. Perhaps under different circumstances at a different time in my life I would do differently, but I did the best with the time I had. Now I am more than seventy-six years old and let the record show that my conscience is clear and I do not regret anything that I have done.

I did my best to raise my family, the best I knew how, the best under the circumstances in which I found myself.

This is what every family must go through - the good and the bad. It's part of living, part of making the journey of everyone's lifetime. Even though I am relaxing now, my mind is still on the past, on past history which I experienced and which I have studied, and I am analyzing the adventures which fate hands you during your lifetime. I face mine without regrets. As I look back on the travels and struggles, and the people I met during my journey - the good, the bad, and the ugly - I find that in the end everything evens out. Each individual has his own storybook.

Public Attention At Last?

A couple of years ago I had spoken with representatives from Steven Spielberg's organization and they were trying to arrange a taping of me speaking about our experiences during the Holocaust. Their reasons for doing this seem noble enough on the surface - to memorialize our experiences for future generations to see - but they insisted that we sign off on all future rights to our information and stories. They would not budge on this one requirement, and when I refused to sign this, it turned out to be the deal breaker. I had an uneasy feeling that Spielberg's organization was somehow using us as an idea farm - because later on they would be free to use our stories and make money off of us, and we would receive nothing in return! People already have used us - so many books, movies and stories have been written about us Jews, so many profits have been made from our experiences, but, in the final analysis, they really are thinking more about themselves than those victims like us who have never been compensated for our great losses and sufferings. They really don't care about us; governments don't care about us either.

I have observed the Polish government, the Nazi rule, the Russian Communist government, the new Polish government, and others, and I do believe that the United States government is still the most advanced and freedom-loving government in the world. You've got to give them credit: most of the leaders in the U.S. government are an example of democracy in action and strive to demonstrate to other countries of the world that theirs is the best example of democracy. The new Russian "democracy" has a long, long way to go before it can be as successful as the United States system. With all the reactionary and fanatical organizations obstructing developing democracies, it is a hard struggle to bring about the right changes. I sympathize with the world's pioneers of democracy. They have an overwhelming and perhaps impossible job.

It took the bestialities of my times to bring the glimmer of hope for future generations that a Holocaust will never again occur, because as long as there is a vivid memory of the horrors that we witnessed, mankind on this ship called earth will strongly fight against any extremism and fanaticism which remotely resembles what happened in my day.

And as for justice, I am more than seventy-six years old and I am still at war with the Germans! When I first arrived in Germany and waiting in numerous displaced persons camps, I applied for compensation for Gittel and my losses through a mechanism set up by the international community called *Wiedergutmachung*, which, translated, means "to make good again." The Germans were responsible for complying with the terms of their surrender by compensating the people whose lives they destroyed. And it was up to the victorious Allies to enforce that agreement. Everyone dropped the ball.

When the war ended, thousands of survivors such as my wife and myself applied for restitution through *Wiedergutmachung*. When we did so, and following a lengthy process, we were eventually rejected because we had not been in a German concentration camp. Our towns had been taken over by Germans, our families' possessions and real estate were confiscated by Germans, and our relatives were destroyed by Germans. But we were told that we were not eligible for restitution because we had spent those years in Russian labor camps and managed to survive. That was their loophole for not compensating us. We appealed the decision and waited some more. In the meantime, I contacted U.S. politicians and statesmen, the State Department, the Department of the Interior, and even the Supreme Court. And all I ever got was the run-around. Eventually a Supreme Court justice told me that cases like ours were too politically charged for them to become involved. Finally, the German government rejected our appeal, too, on the grounds that the time to apply and appeal had run out.

In 1995 I learned that a newly instituted pension plan was providing generous pensions to Germans and foreigners who had worked in Germany in the past, and even former Nazi officials living outside of Germany. Since I had worked as a photographer for the UNRA during the five years we were forced to wait in Germany until our immigration papers came through, it seemed that I, too, would be eligible for one of those German pensions. I submitted my paperwork with high hopes. I was initially told by the German Consulate that my application looked like a strong one. Nevertheless, responses were slow in coming and I had the distinct suspicion that the Germans were stalling in the hopes of outlasting me.

I recently received the decision from the Germans about my pension. For a number of reasons, many of which were erroneous, they rejected the application. I've appealed

their decision and will continue to fight this war, because justice delayed is justice denied.

The German aggression during World War II robbed us of our possessions, our families, our youth, kept us from gainful employment and professional growth for years, and nearly destroyed our lives - but the Germans still feel they owe us nothing.



On the occasion of George and Gertrude Gerzon's 50th wedding anniversary (left to right): (row 1) Kirimi and Jonathan Papp (Shirley's children), Peter and Jennifer Goransson (Helen's children); (row 2) Leonard and Nancy Gerzon, Alexander and Shirley Papp, Paul and Helen Goransson, Gertrude and George Gerzon, Kathy and Benjamin Gerzon

Epilogue:

The Himmelfarbs, Me and Fate

In 1939, on September 1, the war began for us in Poland. The Germans marched in within a day or two and they took over my town without a struggle. I was in Warsaw at the time, separated from the rest of my family, but learned about the events in the town shortly afterwards.

My home town, Krasnosielc Mazowiecki, had a population of about 4,000 inhabitants, of which approximately 2,600 were Jews. When the Germans marched in during September, they grabbed a group of Jews, rounded them up in the temple, and machine gunned them. There were around 80 people killed. A few of them survived the massacre. My grandfather was one of those killed in the temple.

While I was growing up, I knew a family by the name of Himmelfarb. They had ten children. The father was a *sho-het*, a kind of butcher who officiated over the proper kosher slaughtering of animals. He was also a cantor who sang in the temple during the high holidays. That man was also among those massacred in the temple.

As a teenager, I used to do business with him, buying the slaughtered animals' intestines, dried bladders, and ingredients needed in the production of cheese. The family was not very well off, being such a large family. The youngest child, seven years old at the outbreak of the war, was David Himmelfarb.

Some time after the outbreak of the war I escaped to

the east and into the Russian territory. In 1940, the Russians gathered all the Jewish refugees from the cities and towns and shipped them up north, to northern parts of Russia and Siberia. I and my future wife met each other in a transport boat of three thousand people. She was there with her brother, having left behind her parents and other younger siblings.

When we eventually disembarked from the barge which carried us into northern Russia, we were separated into small groups. My group included the widow Himmel-farb and her ten children. They were assigned a room in one of the barracks. My future wife and her brother were next to them in an adjacent room of that barracks, separated only by a thin wall. She later told me that the children were constantly crying due to hunger and the loss of their father. The widow, like the rest of us, had to survive on the meager food and shelter the Russians supplied.

When the U.S. and other allied countries became more involved in the war in 1941, they made the Russians agree to release all those refugees who were being kept against their will in their forced labor camps. At this time we moved on to a larger city by the name of Syktyvkar. At this time the war was raging, and the Russians were facing Hitler's army and losing ground against them, as the Germans took over vast regions and were approaching Moscow and Leningrad. The food available for the population deteriorated and diminished. People were starving. In 1942, we had to ration our food such that we only ate one small meal every 24 hours. It was a difficult time for everyone, including the Russian people.

I was fortunate enough to have a job first at a construction company and later as a supervisor in a tannery for raw materials. In 1943, the food shortages worsened. People were starving, everyone suffered, and the population worked

hard to repel the invading armies of the German occupational forces. Rumors abounded about what was to come.

In 1943, the Germans reached Leningrad. The Allied forces helped the Russian effort. They provided materials for the war machinery, which helped greatly.

As I was walking around Syktyvkar, I learned that the same widow and her ten children were also living in Syktyvkar under very bad conditions, nearly starving. I stopped by to see them. It broke my heart to see how they were living. At that time, thanks to working in the tannery, I could gather some pieces of pork still left on the skins that were delivered for tanning. I gave those pieces of pork to people who needed help. So, I asked that widow if she would like me to bring some of this meat for her family, even though they were orthodox Jews who would never have considered eating pork. During this time, though, everyone was struggling to survive from starvation.

The widow was reluctant, but when she saw the meat she asked me to leave it for her, so that she could feed her children, and I did. I was able to help her a number of times in this way, as well as other survivors, both Jews and non-Jews.

Later, in 1944, the Russian government allowed us to leave for central Russia, this time on more humane transportation. First we traveled by boat to a railroad station, and then we boarded cattle cars on the trains. This time, however, we were not heavily guarded by soldiers, as we had been on our arrival to Russia. At every stop the doors were opened and we were allowed to walk around. The tide had turned for Russia and they were taking back many of the places that the Germans had occupied. We were brought to a town called Shebekino. At that time in 1944, I met again my future wife,

and we were eventually married in that town.

In Shebekino, I found another job in a tannery, and also worked as an interpreter of German prisoners of war until 1945. By the end of 1945, the Russians announced that they had taken back Poland from the Germans and we were free to return to Poland and they would provide free transportation to us.

So, in early 1946 we boarded the transport returning to Poland. I hadn't thought much about the Himmelfarb family in all that time. While on the transport to be shipped out, we stopped at numerous other stations, each with groups of people gathered to be transported back to Poland. We and our child of a few months, Benjamin, were waiting at one of the stations when one of the daughters of the Himmelfarb family, Leah, ran up to us to greet us and to see our new baby. She told me that the rest of the family were in another part of the train. I was glad that they had all survived over all those years without the father.

After arriving in Poland and finding nothing but hostility and danger facing us in that country, my wife, baby and I continued on, and managed to cross over as refugees into Czechoslovakia and the U.S. zone. We lived in displaced persons camps in Bavaria for several years until our immigration papers were approved.

I did not hear anything more over the years about that family.

In 1951 our family immigrated to the United States. I worked hard, had three more children, and the years passed.

In 1994 I received a newsletter addressed to the few known survivors of Krasnosielc Mazowiecki from David,

the youngest son of the Himmelfarb family. What a good feeling I had when I learned through that newsletter that some of the members of the Himmelfarb family had immigrated to Israel. David and his wife had returned to our home town in Poland in 1993 because he was curious about the fate of the town, and he wanted to learn what really happened to his father. Currently David is about 65 years old.

Upon investigation, he found that those townspeople who did survive were the ones who escaped to Russia during the war. According to his figures, of the 2,600 Jewish inhabitants, fewer than 50 survived - some of them are living in the United States and some are in Israel. He tried to gather names through the Holocaust Memorial Library in Washington, D.C., and that is how he found my name. He sent my name to another Krasnosielc survivor in the United States, as well as a reporter, and they contacted me to ask if I wanted to take part in a reunion in Poland in June of 1996 to dedicate a memorial to those who died in the temple the day of the massacre in 1939. A plaque was to be placed at the temple where those nearly many Jews were massacred.

I considered going, since my grandfather was one of those massacred, but, being advanced in years and also since my granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah was scheduled in June 1996, I declined. The organizers kept in contact with me with updates on the trip planning, and some survivors in the United States contacted me to get together.

The Polish Historical Organization, an Israeli organization, and others arranged the commemoration of the site and the writing of a history of that town, which would not leave out the role the Jewish population played in the town. They also planned a tour of the region.

I chose not to go, but provided information and kept

in touch with David Himmelfarb, whose name is now David Sachar. Other inhabitants like me also changed their names to names which would be easier to use in their new countries when they immigrated. One Krasnosielc survivor lives in Boca Raton, Florida. Another lives in Brooklyn, New York. Another lives in Michigan. Some are in Canada. The majority who survived are in Israel. Some have married and divorced. Many are already deceased. So, tracking down these people was no easy task.

I still don't know what happened to David's widowed mother and his other siblings. I am still trying to find out. All I know is one sister married and divorced an Englishman and is now living in the United States. I can only guess that they are scattered between the U.S. and Israel.

A small group did return to my hometown of Krasnosielc Mazowiecki in June of 1996. Later I received a little package and communique from Israel and also from the Polish historical organization. The Polish had prepared a publication which was a history of that town for the past two hundred years. In its thirty pages it included pictures and even a description of the dedication of that temple's plaque in June 1996. The cover of this booklet was a photo of the infamous temple, which has been colorized to appear like blood is spilling out of the windows and onto the roof. The building is now being used as a grain warehouse.

In September 1996, this booklet was published, completely in Polish, but it will soon be translated into other languages for other nationalities to be able to read, including the U.S. and Canada.

The booklet, which is being distributed around Poland now, includes a photo of our family in Canton, Massachusetts. In the photo, taken in 1967, my son Benjamin is

wearing his U.S. Marines uniform since he was on his way to Vietnam at that time. Among all the old pictures of people from the town they chose to include that one, too, in the town's historical document!

The booklet also includes a picture of my uncle, Pinchas Kassel, who survived the war to return to Poland, having fought in the underground resistance army, and who chose to remain there. The booklet describes that upon his return he paid all his back taxes in order to regain possession of all his properties in Poland. He had been a wealthy man prior to the war. A picture shows him in 1946 back in Poland with other survivors. In 1947 I had my last communication with him. He was about forty years old then, and I begged him to immigrate with me. He insisted on staying. (Ironically, all records about him disappeared after that time, and so did he.)

Most interesting of all, according to the booklet, in 1952 the two German generals who were responsible for the massacre in the temple were put on trial by the German Republic and convicted. Their photos are included in the booklet and documents this as the first known German massacre of Jews in Poland.

In addition to the famous Gerzons, the booklet reports that the Warner brothers of American film fame came from my home town, and their family came to the United States in the late 1800's. The booklet contains a picture of their family, too.

The publication also includes photos of various sites around the town, as well as of early Zionist groups during the 1930's who immigrated - just prior to the outbreak of war. This history of the town brought back many memories for me. I think this story and stories like mine are worthy of be-

ing made into a movie. I have been contacted by Steven Spielberg's organization to have my story included as a videotaped interview among thousands of others they have contacted, in the creation of a museum of videotapes being set up by him for survivors of the Holocaust. Frankly, I think the stories of these survivors deserve more than a 20 minute video-tape to be filed in the archives of a museum.

What a twist of fate that the young son of the widow from my town came to meet me again after all these years and be the organizer of this pilgrimage to my home town to remind the Polish people and others that a community of Jews did exist there once, and, in spite of others' efforts to destroy them and their memory, managed to survive and tell the story so that others will not forget. David Himmelfarb (now Sachar) came to know me better after this experience. Fate showed its hand each time our paths crossed over all these years, allowing me to play a role in his family's survival during a time when everyone suffered.

It was fate which also brought me and my wife together. Although she came from a town about 60 kilometers from my home town, our paths repeatedly crossed hundreds of miles away as we were transported from labor camps to Russian villages and towns, until we were finally united in marriage. Fate had it for us all to survive, raise our families, tell our tale, and one day bring the villains to justice. Perhaps that is why we survived.

Appendix:
Biblical Stories
Whose Messages Are
Most Meaningful To Me

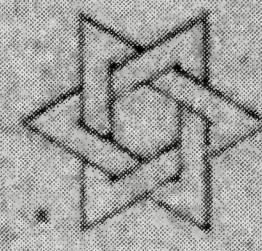


QUITTUNG ÜBER EINE KRONEN

1

WER DIESE
QUITTUNG
ODER GEFÄH-
RDET

MIT FÄLSCHUNG ODER NACHSCHNITT
DIESE QUITTUNGEN IN VERKEHR BRINGT
WIRD STRENGSTENS BESTRAFT



1

Jewish currency issued at the concentration camp at Theresienstadt.

Abraham

Going back in history over five thousand seven hundred years, a man named Abraham has been recognized as the person who conceived of the idea of worshipping one God while the pagans who surrounded him worshipped many gods and idols. In fact, Abraham's family were idol-worshippers as well. Yet Abraham's monotheistic ideas marked the beginning of the organized worship of one God.

According to biblical history, Abraham married a woman named Sarah. She also came from a pagan family, but accepted Abraham's religious beliefs. For many years she was unable to bear him any children, so, as was the custom in those days, Abraham took a second wife who eventually bore him a son, Ishmael. Sarah became increasingly jealous and complained of the favor which Abraham bestowed on Ishmael, and she made Abraham's life miserable. Miraculously, in her later years, when Ishmael was already fully grown and Abraham truly considered him his only beloved son, Sarah herself gave birth to a son, Isaac.

When Isaac was born, Sarah grew more desperate and jealous. While Isaac was growing up, she nagged Abraham to banish his second wife and Ishmael so that they would not have to encounter them while she was raising their son Isaac.

The years passed and Isaac grew to be a man. Then he took a wife of his own from one of his family's descendants, but she was also pagan. Nevertheless, he promised his father that he would continue the dynasty of the one-God believers, despite the fact that they were a small group compared to the multitude of pagans who surrounded them. Abraham and Isaac were fervent in their belief that the worship of one God was the only way towards progress.

Jacob and Esau

Isaac married, and his wife bore him one son, Esau. Then he took a second wife and had another son, Jacob. Jacob and Isaac's youth together was marked by a strong sibling rivalry, and they were constantly in competition. Jacob, although younger, was more educated and his belief in one God linked him to the ideals of his father and grandfather.

As they grew older, their rivalry became more vicious and dangerous. The norms for inheritance at that time defined that the eldest son was to receive all the possessions of his father upon his death. As the years passed Isaac grew old and blind. Jacob's mother schemed to ensure that Jacob, not Esau, would inherit his father's fortune. Her plan was that one day Jacob would pretend that he was Esau and convince his father to bequeath all his possessions to him, not knowing that he, in fact, would be relinquishing his possessions to Jacob and not Esau. So, one day, while Esau was hunting, Jacob put on Esau's clothes, approached his father and said, "I have come to bring you some gifts. I want you to bless me with the blessings of your older son." Isaac thought the boy was Esau and he blessed him and bestowed all the bequests of his other son to Jacob. When Esau returned home, he was furious that he had been cheated of the privileges of the elder son and the right to his inheritance. He was so enraged that he vowed to kill his brother.

Jacob fled for his life and hid for a long time. Finally, his mother told him to escape to the land of his ancestors who lived far away. After all, he could not even take himself a wife from among the people of his homeland, so living among his pagan relatives in a distant land seemed his only recourse.

As he approached his destination, he rested at one of

the oases and said to himself, "The first girl who approaches me to draw some water from the well will be my wife." That was his wish. In a few hours, one girl, Rachel, approached the well. He approached her and said, "I am thirsty and I have journeyed a great distance. Would you give me some water to wash myself?" The girl looked at him and instantly fell in love with him. She gave him water to drink and wash his feet from the long journey. Then she took him home to meet her father, who happened to be a distant relative of Jacob.

When Rachel's father arrived home, Jacob recounted his story to his long-lost relative. The father replied, "If you want my daughter you must work for her. You must tend my sheep for seven years. And after seven years I will give you my daughter to be your wife." Jacob agreed and worked for seven years.

As the time neared that this distant relative was to give his daughter Rachel to be Jacob's wife, Rachel's father had another plan. He had another daughter, Leah, who was older than Rachel and not as pretty. On the wedding day he cheated Jacob because he feared that Jacob would return to his homeland instead of continue working for him. He brought to Jacob the elder daughter, unbeknownst to Jacob until after the wedding.

Jacob was enraged. The new in-laws, pagans who worshipped idols, told Jacob that he could still wed the second daughter if he would work another seven years. And, as a bonus, every newborn lamb which had wool of two colors would belong to Jacob. The offer was attractive, since Jacob would accumulate a flock of sheep which would belong to him and his family.

Over the course of seven years, Jacob's wives bore

him twelve sons. Rachel could not have children, Jacob discovered. Finally, after many years, she had a daughter. Jacob also had two other wives, and each wife bore him children. The family grew to twelve sons and one daughter. After the second seven years, Jacob felt he had spent enough time with his in-laws and yearned to return to his homeland.

By this time he had accumulated sheep, possessions, family. He did not fear Esau anymore and believed that they could reconcile and live in peace. He began the journey back to this homeland and, when he approached home, he sent some of his messengers to negotiate a settlement with Esau. Fourteen years had passed. When he finally met Esau and offered him some concessions and stated that he wanted to live in peace as long as each could go his own way, Esau accepted. They established a rapport, but Esau was a free spirit. He hunted and lived a primitive life. Jacob was entrenched in the customs of another life, based on the beliefs of his father and grandfather to continue the one-God dynasty.

While en route back, Rachel became ill and died. Jacob buried her in the ancient land of Israel. He continued his journey, however.

Joseph

After years passed, Jacob's sons became fathers and grandfathers, and they and he became old. They tended his flock. His most favored son was Joseph. The other brothers started to be jealous of Joseph, because, while they toiled for their father, Joseph was allowed to stay home and attend to the light household chores.

Jacob's favoritism of Joseph led his brothers to plan a spiteful trick. They took Joseph out to the fields, teased him, and then discussed among themselves what they should do to him. Some suggested he be killed because he deprived them of their father's love. Some could not bear the thought of killing their own brother. Eventually, they decided to throw Joseph in a ditch and abandon him, so Jacob would think his precious Joseph was lost forever.

The following day his brothers kidnapped Joseph and left him in a ditch filled with snakes and vermin, hoping to teach him a lesson and also show their father that they were not receiving enough attention from him.

During that day that they left Joseph in the ditch, a caravan of travelers passed and they heard his screaming. They pulled the youngster out of the ditch, saving his life, and took him with them to Egypt where they were traveling on business. At that time, slave trade was a thriving business, and they planned to sell the young boy as a slave. In Egypt, Joseph was put on the selling block and purchased.

The following day, his brothers returned for Joseph, but could not find him. Wondering what to do and how to explain to their father, they used one of Joseph's garments, slaughtered a lamb and spread the blood on the coat, and brought it to their father. They explained that Joseph had got-

ten lost and was eaten by a beast. They showed the bloodied garment to prove the story. The elderly father wept for his lost beloved son.

Meanwhile, in the years that followed, Joseph remained a slave to the Egyptian family that purchased him. As he matured, his keen intellect and wit were obvious to all who met him. He was also able to interpret all kinds of dreams. The owner of the slaves became very attached to this young slave whose origin was unknown to them. One day, the Pharaoh of Egypt became very ill and had very unpleasant dreams. The dreams caused him such concern that he called upon all his advisors to explain them, and no one seemed able to interpret them satisfactorily.

Joseph's owners, hearing of the Pharaoh's difficulty in interpreting his dreams, volunteered their slave Joseph to interpret the dreams. At the time Joseph was in jail because he was falsely accused of attacking one of his owner's women. They mentioned that Joseph was under arrest and had to be freed from jail in order to interpret the dreams.

Pharaoh sent some of his helpers to bring Joseph to him to interpret his dreams. Joseph's explanations were astoundingly realistic, and Joseph lived at the palace and served Pharaoh, interpreting his dreams to Pharaoh's satisfaction for many years. One prediction arising from Joseph's interpretations was that a famine would spread over Egypt and everyone would be plagued with hunger and suffering. Joseph predicted the region would experience seven good years and seven bad years. Joseph advised that during the seven good years Egypt should store supplies to withstand the seven bad years.

Joseph's predictions came to pass. During the seven good years Pharaoh gave Joseph authority to supervise all

the grain gathering for the seven bad years. He would later be the distributor of the grain during the bad years.

When the period of famine began, food shortages spread to all the regions of the area, including the land of Joseph's ancestors. People came from miles around to the storehouses of Egypt and begged for food to feed their starving families.

By this time, the twelve tribes of which Joseph's brothers were the leaders, had grown to a great dynasty. When they, too, were in the throes of famine, they heard of the stored grain in Egypt. Joseph's father, Jacob, the leader of the twelve tribes, decided to send to Egypt some of the brothers, who were the leaders of individual tribes, to purchase grain for their people. When they met with Joseph, he recognized them to be his brothers, although they did not recognize him.

Joseph sold them the grain they requested, but not without first learning all he could about his father's people and their activities. He finally revealed himself as their long lost brother and convinced them to settle in Egypt.

His father, the entire dynasty of tribes and his brothers did indeed settle in Egypt. Joseph took full advantage of his political influence as advisor to Pharaoh to gain respect and obedience, as well as place members of his family in important positions in the kingdom. He forgave his brothers for their mistreatment of him because he believed that his faith in God saved him and what had occurred was God's will.

Joseph maintained his leadership among his dynasty and predicted that one day his people would grow to become a great nation and also would return to the land of their ancestors.

When he died, the families of the twelve tribes grew to many thousands of believers in God. Egypt continued to be a pagan land, however.

Moses

After Joseph's death, jealousy grew among the tribesman who had settled in Egypt, known today as Jews but at that time called Israelites, the twelve tribes. After awhile, the leaders in Egypt began to resent their freewheeling good life and the privileges which these tribesmen enjoyed. So, they established laws against them. Out of their jealousy they instigated cruelty against these monotheistic peoples, claiming that these strangers were a threat to their own pagan way of life and their beliefs. These Egyptians, particularly the pagan priests, sought to overthrow the Israeli sect. The Jews faced growing oppression.

As the years passed, the oppression of the Israelites led to a decree which made them all slaves to Egypt. They served as laborers for meager pay as the worker-slaves in Egyptian construction projects.

This phenomenon of growing jealousy of successful people leading to increased oppression and eventual slavery recurs throughout history, even in the twentieth century. For the Jewish people, the worst and most recent example of this is the enslaving and slaughtering of six million Jews during the Nazi campaign, the most devastating result of jealousy, cowardice and unwillingness of people to live together with one another as equals.

In Egypt during those trying times in history, a decree was passed to reduce the Jewish birth rate. According to the law, all first-born Jewish males were to be tossed into the river and left to die. During the time that this harsh law was in force, one young mother decided to place her baby in the river in a small raft, in hopes that an Egyptian would save him.

One of the Egyptian princesses of the Pharaoh noticed the baby floating down the river, and she took him in and adopted him. She gave him the name Moses, which means "drawn from the river." While Moses was being raised in the royal palace, one of the priests concluded to Pharaoh that this child was probably one of the offspring of the Jewish tribesmen and should be put to death. But Pharaoh had grown fond of the baby and would not have him killed. The priest then suggested a test for the baby. Pharaoh would place his crown and a platter of hot coals on the floor. If the baby grabbed the crown and put it on his head, he would be killed. Otherwise, he would live. Pharaoh agreed.

When the baby Moses was put to the test, instead of reaching for the glittering crown, he grabbed one of the hot coals and put it to his mouth. From that day onward his tongue was permanently injured and he would always have a speech impediment. Nonetheless, his life was spared. The Bible claims that an angel pushed him to take the coal.

Moses was raised with all the privileges of a prince of Egypt. His adopted mother loved him dearly and made sure that he received all the benefits and honor of a true prince of Egypt.

As an adult, Moses was responsible for supervising projects where slaves were working. By this time he realized that he was an offspring of the twelve tribes. One day, he saw one of the leaders brutally beating and punishing the slaves. He could not tolerate the sight and he rode up and killed that leader. Immediately he was brought to Pharaoh as a criminal accused of murdering an Egyptian leader. The high priests encouraged Pharaoh to sentence Moses to death, while Moses' mother pleaded with Pharaoh to spare his life. Pharaoh's judgment was that Moses be banished from Egypt and set free in the desert where he would be allowed to remain,

if he survived.

Sometime during his many years of exile, while living in an oasis in the Sinai Desert, Moses met a family of sheep herders who had seven daughters. The exhausted Moses, who had been wandering for many days, begged one of the daughters for water and food. She took him in and he eventually married all of the seven daughters. The one who found him, Saporah, was the most special to him.

During his nomadic existence, Moses explored the entire Sinai region while tending sheep for his family. He grew quite familiar with the entire peninsula. Nevertheless, he longed to return to Egypt and help his tribespeople, whom he heard from passers-by were suffering even more than before. He heartily believed that their salvation could be had if he returned to Egypt and instigated a revolt which would free his people from their slavery. He grew obsessed with the idea of freeing his people, becoming their leader, and leading them out of Egypt.

During Moses' absence from Egypt, the Pharaoh who had exiled Moses had died and his son succeeded him in the leadership of Egypt. This son was a stepson and somewhat sympathetic of Moses, so he pardoned Moses. Nevertheless, Moses was vehement in his insistence that the slaves be released so they might return to the land of their ancestors. Even his adopted mother appealed to Pharaoh on Moses' behalf.

The Moses revolt was at last victorious as Moses led his people out of Egypt through the desert he knew so well. When they reached the river to cross into the Sinai Desert, Moses' vast experience in the area allowed him to calculate exactly when the river would be at its lowest levels and safe to cross. He also knew that immediately following the low

water period, the river would rise and flood the countryside.

Moses succeeded in bringing his people, as well as many Egyptian sympathizers, out of Egypt.

Once all his followers were safely in the Sinai Desert, Moses disappeared into the mountains to compose a legal system by which these people would be guided and ruled. For forty days he meditated on the dilemma of controlling this illiterate, lawless group of people.

After his forty days absence, Moses returned to the settlement only to find that people were running wild, behaving irreverently and completely uncontrolled. He seriously doubted if he would be capable of bringing law to these people. He hoped that the new laws he carried to them, in the form of the Ten Commandments, would bring order to their lives.

The sight which greeted him upon his arrival was that of people engaged in wild parties. They had fabricated Egyptian-style idols and were worshipping them. There was discontent among the people due to the hardships and shortages, and some members were instigating a revolt of their own to return to Egypt. The rebellion had begun upon his return.

Moses challenged the people he faced. He announced that those who opposed him should stand to one side, and those who supported him should stand beside him. He ordered those who believed in one God but who did not stand with him be punished by death. So, all those who opposed him were either put to death or banished.

It was an almost impossible task instilling the new rules and beliefs in these people. Moses estimated that it would take at least two generations to pass before the ideas

would be accepted. Moses continued to wander in the desert, and eventually the Ten Commandments were accepted as law.

King Solomon

As they grew strong and confident, the Jewish tribes sought to reclaim the land which was taken from their ancestors. They managed to do so after forty years. When they finally resettled in the ancient land of their ancestors, this country of people who believed in only one God became the most prosperous of their time.

For centuries, this nation grew to be a powerful example to all the regions around them. But some enemies, who did not want to believe in the one God, waged wars against them. Many wars were fought against idol-worshippers up until the time of King Solomon, whose reign was the most prosperous period for the ancient Jews.

Also during this time, however, there existed growing dissent from those who wanted to take on the customs and cultures of neighboring pagan nations. During King Solomon's rule, the most prosperous cities were built, as well as the most beautiful temple in the world, King Solomon's Temple. People came from miles around to admire his cities and pay homage to King Solomon. They brought him lavish gifts, including wives to add to his harem. He possessed one thousand wives, history tells us. The many wives had children, and these children were his heirs to the throne.

Conquests of the Jews by Their Enemies

Following Solomon's death, the in-fighting began because every prince felt he had the right to claim the throne and leadership of King Solomon's kingdom. The battles led to schisms and each tribe became a separate state and enemies against each other. Their enemies were waiting for just such a situation, when Israel would be divided and weak and vulnerable, instead of strong and unified. As each state was attacked, other states did not come to its aid. This began the downfall of the states of ancient Israel.

The first to attack were the Philistines. Then came the Assyrians. Some tribesmen came from Ishmael's dynasty. But the heaviest attacks came from the Babylonians, better known as the Persians. They overran the entire region and took all the inhabitants as slaves.

The Jews who were taken to Persia were the most educated and, as such, did enjoy certain privileges. The poorest classes were not greatly affected by the invasion. They were of little or no use to the Babylonians. The Jews in Persia managed to prosper, and the natives, especially the religious leaders, once again became jealous of their success. These religious leaders fomented hatred against the Jews, warning that the natives someday would be overtaken by these strangers.

Esther

It eventually came to pass that some of the Persian rulers decided to invoke harsh laws against the Jews who were living among them. These laws were so brutal that they included severe punishment of Jews for minor crimes, seizure of their positions and possessions, and, to rid themselves of the Jewish problem, annihilation of the Jews. The king in power at the time agreed to these decisions, but one of his wives was a Jew by the name of Esther. She pleaded with the king just before these harsh rules were to become law, because among the first to be affected would be her own uncle who had raised her.

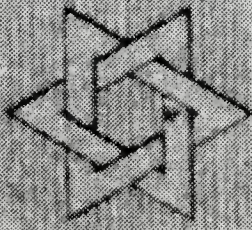
She managed to persuade the king to abolish these rules because she discovered that the same people who were plotting to eliminate the Jews were also plotting to overthrow the king himself. Just days before the law was to take effect, the king ordered the arrest and hanging of the leader responsible for this plotting and the hanging took place at the site which had been prepared for the hanging of the Jews. Instead, the king ordered more privileges and rewards to the Jews because they were truthful and faithful to the king.

The prosperity of the Jewish people grew so abundant that they were able to send riches to their kinfolk in Israel to help them rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem which had been destroyed during the siege of ancient Israel. Among those who lived in Babylon, some assimilated to the rules and customs of the Babylonians. Others upheld their heritage and culture.

When the Temple was rebuilt, the Jews who wished to do so were allowed to return to Israel. Others remained in Persia. After all, life was good, much like the way of the

world today, with Jews prospering and happy throughout the world and continuing to support those who remained in Israel.

A032



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Quittung
über

REICHENKRONEN

THERESIENSTADT AM 1 JANUAR 1943

DER ÄLTESTE DER JUDEN
IN DER THERESIENSTADT

Joseph Edelberg

Currency created by the Germans during World War II for use by Jewish prisoners at the Theresienstadt concentration camp



Israel Arbeiter, representing the Holocaust survivors' organization, speaking at the 1973 dedication of the Brandeis University Holocaust Memorial

This song was sung fifty years ago at a displaced persons camp in Germany, and I noted the words

(Sung in Yiddish, written phonetically)

*In ein litvish shtetel veit,
In ein shtible in ein zeit,
Dorch a fenster nicht kein grois,
Kicken kinderlech arois,
Yingelech mid blonde kepf,
Maidelech mid blonde tsep,
In tsuzammen dort mid zei,
Kicken shvartze oigen tsvei.*

*Shvartze oigen fild mid hein,
In ein naizele kleins,
Lippelech zum kishen gur,
In shtarke golotka shvartze hur,
De mama hott im du gebracht,
Eingevickled shpait bei nacht,
Gekisht, gevaint, gehaldst, gekluckt,
In shtillerheit azoy gezuckt:*

*Fin haimt mein kindt ist du dein ort,
Gedankt dei mamas ledste wort,
Zei hott ich du gebracht defar,
Veil ist drut er eingefar,
Mid de kinder shpielzich fein,
Ruyich shtul gehorch zam zein,
Kein yiddish wort, kein yiddish lid,
Fin eint mein kindt bist mair kein yid.*

*Dus kindt gebayton sich bei ir,
Ich vil besser Mama zein mid dir,
Vie los die mich ibber alein,
Es ott getsitterd in gevaint,*

*Zei hott im tsigesucht asach,
 No nicht geholfen ott kein shim zach,
 Er ott geshriggen nein nein nein,
 Ich vill nicht Mama du bleiben alein.*

*Oif de handt genommen im,
 In mid ein tsitterdicker shtim,
 Azoy va mool baizichen shtib,
 Ein geshlaift im auf gich,
 Mid roite oigen fungevaint,
 Gekisht sein kerperel zein kleins,
 Gekisht, gevaint, in gekluckt,
 In shtillerheit tzug im gezuckt:*

*Ein kelt in droissen in a vind,
 Ein shtimme hertzig for mein kindt,
 Gelosst hob ich dich in fremde hendt,
 Veil andersht hob ich nicht gekendt,
 Ein fremde shtib mid menchen fill,
 Er dreidzich dorten ruyicht shtil,
 Red nicht, bait nicht, zucht kein wort,
 In tseitins ven her get a lach.*

*Fremdt far im ist yaide shtim,
 Fremde shprach wus men red tzu im,
 Zei numen Wasa is in fremd,
 Zei kinderich hertzel ist shtark faclemdt,
 Ein mamas hartz es filt es git,
 Ze filt us oif in yaiden minit,
 Ze filt dus hartz es geir ir ois,
 Zeit Yosele ist frun shtib arois.*

*Zie Moishes mama bin ich gleich,
 Azoy vie Moishe oif em taich,
 Elteinzeim aufen wind,
 Ob ich dorten gelosst mein kindt.*

Loosely Translated:

*There's a place in a little town
Where through a tiny window
Looking out at the children -
Young blond-haired boys
Young blond-braided girls -
Are two dark black eyes so round.*

*Dark black eyes filled with pain,
And a tiny young nose to smell the rain,
Delicate lips that kiss so sweet,
And thick black hair, a hearty mane.
His mama brought him here in fright,
Sneaked him in very late one night,
Then kissed him, hugged him, cried and held him,
And very softly spoke these words:*

*From now on my child this is your home,
Remember your mama's final words,
I've brought you because
You will be safe here,
One day you'll play like those children near.
But keep silent when you hear them speak.
No Yiddish word, no Yiddish sound from you,
From this moment on you are no longer a Jew.*

*He pleaded with her not to go,
I would rather be with you, Mama, please, no.
You're leaving me all alone,
He screamed and he cried and he moaned.
He begged and prayed, but to no avail.
And then he sobbed, No No No,
Mama, please don't leave, don't go.*

*His mother wrapped him in her arms,
 Rocked and gently calmed him down,
 Like she had done many times before,
 She soothed him until he was awake no more.
 With reddened eyes from the tears she shed,
 She kissed his precious little head
 And in a quiet whisper said:*

*It's cold outside and there's a wind,
 And I bear a heavy heart for my child.
 I've left you in a stranger's care,
 Because I cannot keep you safe, my dear.
 A foreign town filled with people new,
 There you'll live but silently, it's true,
 Do not speak, do not beg, when they're around,
 And then she made a mournful sound.*

*Everything will be strange, you see,
 A foreign language is what you'll hear,
 You'll have a different name, Wasa you'll be.
 Your young heart must stay strong.
 Your mama's heart is glad you're safe,
 But I'll miss you the whole day long,
 And my heart will stop, will burst from my chest,
 When my Yossel one day will fly from this nest.*

*I feel like Moses' mother with her basket,
 Watching her child float down that river wild,
 For you are taken with this terrible wind,
 And I, too, have now lost my child.*



George and Gertrude Gerzon, October 1999

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